

# Prevalence of Mistreatment of Medical Students by Patients: The Difference Gender Makes

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## BACKGROUND

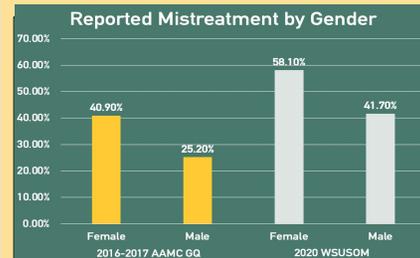
- It has been widely documented that medical students are subjected to mistreatment by faculty involved in their clinical education.<sup>1,6</sup>
- There is a significant gap in our knowledge of the extent that students are mistreated by patients and the effect gender has on mistreatment, which may be attributable to the nearly universal acceptance of patient mistreatment as a part of medical training.<sup>2</sup>
- Published studies to date (referenced below) regarding medical student mistreatment based on gender exclusively focus on faculty as perpetrators.
- A recent study that analyzed GQ survey data demonstrated that female students report mistreatment and discrimination based on gender at higher rates than male students.<sup>3</sup>
- Other studies found that female medical students experience sexual harassment/assault at higher rates than males, with one study reporting a rate of 33.3%.<sup>4,5</sup>
- This study investigates the prevalence of student mistreatment perpetrated specifically by patients, with an emphasis on differences based on gender.

## METHODS

- A voluntary and anonymous Qualtrics survey was made available to all medical students currently enrolled at Wayne State University School of Medicine (WSUSOM) between April and June of 2020.
- Surveys were administered to potential participants via recruitment emails sent to WSUSOM class listservs, which included the survey link.
- The survey was modeled from the "Behaviors Experienced During Medical School" section of the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) Graduation Questionnaire (GQ) to allow for comparison of prevalence of mistreatment behaviors toward medical students performed by individuals in different roles.
- The focus was to investigate the prevalence of mistreatment behaviors exhibited by patients toward medical students, excluding patient behavior attributed to neuropsychiatric symptoms.
- A total of 582 students (50.7%) completed the survey, and the results are based on their responses by gender.

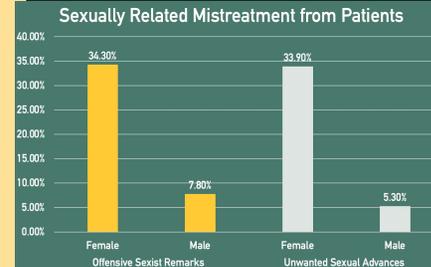
## RESULTS

### Female medical students report mistreatment at higher rates than male medical students, especially sexually related mistreatment.



**Figure 1.** According to data from AAMC GQ (2016 & 2017), 40.9% of female students vs 25.2% of male students experienced mistreatment by individuals directly involved in their clinical education, excluding patients. Based on our results, patient-incited mistreatment of female students was even higher at 58.1% vs 41.7% for male students.

**Figure 2.** According to our data, the prevalence of sexually related mistreatment by patients toward female medical students, including offensive sexist remarks (34.3%) and unwanted sexual advances (33.9%), is alarmingly higher than those same behaviors toward male medical students (7.8% and (5.3%) respectively.



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## CONCLUSION

- Based on this initial study, patients constitute a greater source of mistreatment to medical students than faculty.
- Female medical students reported general mistreatment at higher rates than male medical students.
- While a significant portion of all medical students report mistreatment by patients during their medical education, female medical students are disproportionately affected by unwanted sexual advances and sexist remarks.
- The alarming rates at which sexually related mistreatment events occur is concerning and requires further attention due to their potential to cause psychological distress to the students experiencing them and adversely impact their medical training.
- Other forms of mistreatment, such as public humiliation, physical harm, and discrimination based on race or sexual orientation, were comparable between genders.

## SIGNIFICANCE

- This topic has crucial implications as medical student mistreatment contributes to higher rates of burnout, depression, and suicidality, as well as impacts future career choice and career satisfaction.<sup>6,7,8</sup>
- There is evidence that sexual harassment specifically experienced in the clinical setting also has severe repercussions on mental health in nurses, which likely also applies to other healthcare professionals.<sup>9</sup>
- It is imperative that more robust data be collected on this issue in order to create effective interventions that mitigate patient mistreatment of medical students.
- As institutions continue to require clinical training earlier in their curricula, female students are placed at increased risk compared to their male counterparts to be recipients of mistreatment by patients in a setting with minimal faculty supervision.
- Inclusion of patients as potential sources of mistreatment within the national AAMC GQ and Year 2 (Y2) surveys would allow for this, as patients are explicitly excluded from these surveys at this time.
- Subsequent results could guide institutions to create strategic policies, procedures, and training opportunities that are necessary to help protect this vulnerable population.