



**Centre for Workplace Excellence Submission**  
**to the**  
**INQUIRY INTO WORKPLACE FATIGUE AND BULLYING**  
**IN SOUTH AUSTRALIAN HOSPITALS AND HEALTH**  
**SERVICES**

Prepared by:

Michelle R. Tuckey<sup>1</sup>

Yiqiong Li<sup>2</sup>

Annabelle M. Neall<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Centre for Workplace Excellence, University of South Australia

<sup>2</sup>UQ Business School, University of Queensland

Contact:

[michelle.tuckey@unisa.edu.au](mailto:michelle.tuckey@unisa.edu.au)

## Contents

Overview	2
Workplace Bullying Arises from Poor Organisational Functioning	3
Bullying as a Work Health and Safety Hazard	4
Risk Management of Bullying at Work using the New Evidence-Based Risk Audit Tool	5
References	8

## Overview

Workplace bullying is a serious work health and safety hazard in Australia, and a particular challenge within the health sector.<sup>1 2 3 4 5</sup> Evidence from the international research literature,<sup>6 7 8</sup> and real-life bullying complaints from South Australian workers,<sup>9</sup> suggests that workplace bullying is primarily a product of poor organisational functioning rather than stemming from interpersonal relationship or personality conflicts.

A major barrier for effectively addressing bullying at work is that common approaches treat bullying as an interpersonal problem between staff members. Strategies such as anti-bullying policies, bullying awareness training, and investigating complaints as they arise focus directly on behaviour that takes place between individuals, overlooking the root causes of the behaviour that lie in the way the organisation functions on a day-to-day basis.

In this submission, we present a new practical solution for bridging the gap between what we know about the causes of workplace bullying and what can be done to prevent it: an evidence-based risk audit tool, validated in South Australian hospitals. The risk audit tool enables managers; human resources and organisational development professionals; work health and safety regulators, inspectors, and specialists; and employee representatives to identify and address the organisational risk factors for workplace bullying. Using the tool, it is possible to obtain an accurate diagnosis of the risk factors and respond to them by identifying and implementing risk control strategies, thereby carrying out sustainable and effective bullying prevention.

Specifically, in this submission we:

- Summarise evidence demonstrating that bullying at work arises from the nature of the work and, especially, how work is coordinated and managed in organisations;

---

<sup>1</sup> Ariza-Montes *et al.* 2013

<sup>2</sup> Hutchinson *et al.* 2010

<sup>3</sup> Hutchinson *et al.* 2006

<sup>4</sup> McLinton *et al.* 2014

<sup>5</sup> SafeWork Australia, 2018

<sup>6</sup> Bowling & Beehr, 2006

<sup>7</sup> Francioli *et al.*, 2015

<sup>8</sup> Skogstad *et al.*, 2011

<sup>9</sup> Tuckey *et al.*, 2015

- Explain how workplace bullying can be risk managed as a work health and safety hazard; and
- Overview the development and potential applications of a new evidence-based risk audit tool for the risk management of workplace bullying.

### **Workplace Bullying Arises from Poor Organisational Functioning**

Looking across the scholarly evidence base, understanding the organisational risk factors must be a central consideration when seeking to prevent workplace bullying.<sup>10</sup>

In 2006, the first (and only) meta-analysis<sup>11</sup> of the potential causes of bullying at work was published, which examined all published peer-reviewed journal articles in the international literature at that time (a total of 90 different studies). The key predictors of bullying exposure from the analysis were job demands (such as role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload and work constraints) and lack of resources (in particular autonomy). These factors were also highlighted in a recent narrative review of workplace bullying research<sup>12</sup> and in our Australian research on workplace bullying.<sup>13 14 15</sup>

The meta-analysis of potential causes also looked at relationships between individual characteristics of the target (such as self-esteem and negative affectivity) and workplace bullying. The evidence for these factors was not as strong as that for work-related factors, even though personal factors are assumed to play an important role in workplace bullying.<sup>16</sup> There is also emerging evidence that individual characteristics and personality traits might actually be changed as a result of exposure to bullying,<sup>17</sup> rather than increasing the likelihood that some workers will be bullied or bully others.

#### **Key Message**

The underlying risk factors for workplace bullying are embedded in how jobs are designed and how people and tasks are managed in organisations. So, although it plays during interactions between workers, bullying at work is not primarily an interpersonal problem.

Even though the knowledge base regarding the causes of bullying behaviour continues to expand,<sup>18</sup> the evidence on prevention initiatives is severely limited.<sup>19</sup> Existing bullying prevention and intervention strategies, in practice, tend to focus on implementation of workplace bullying policies, anti-bullying education and training programs, incident reporting systems, and complaint investigations.<sup>20</sup> Targeting bullying behaviour through these strategies

<sup>10</sup> Tuckey, Zadow, Li, & Caponecchia, in press

<sup>11</sup> Bowling & Beehr, 2006

<sup>12</sup> Samnani & Singh, 2012

<sup>13</sup> Tuckey, Chrisopoulos, & Dollard, 2012

<sup>14</sup> Tuckey, Dollard, Hosking, & Winefield, 2009

<sup>15</sup> Tuckey & Neall, 2014

<sup>16</sup> Hodgins, MacCurtain, & Mannix-McNamara, 2014

<sup>17</sup> Nielsen, Glas, Einarsen, 2017

<sup>18</sup> Neall & Tuckey, 2014

<sup>19</sup> Hodgins *et al.*, 2014

<sup>20</sup> Caponecchia, Branch, & Murray, 2019

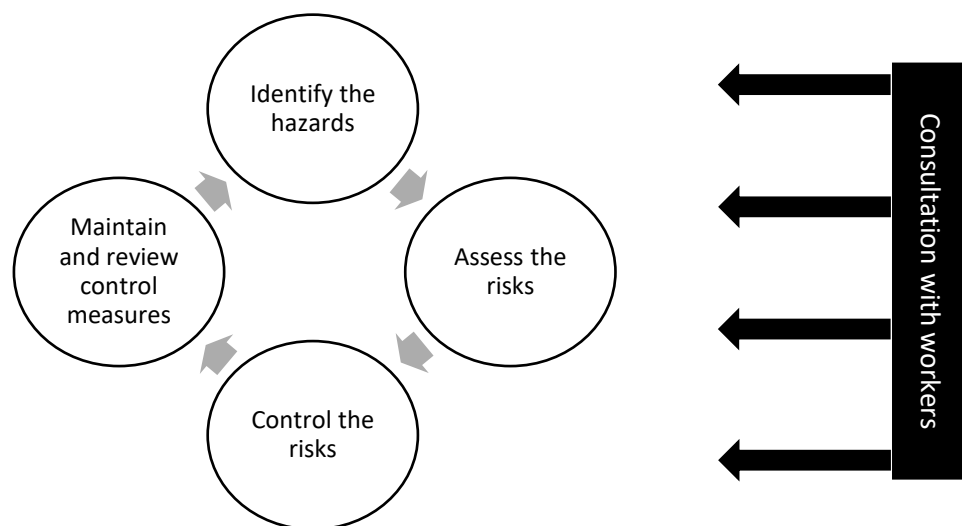
forms part of a comprehensive anti-bullying strategy but overlooks the organisational risk factors that enable, reward, and trigger bullying.<sup>21</sup> Said another way, these remedies are not sufficient for effective bullying prevention because they rely on the responses of individual workers to be effective. For example, bullying awareness training may educate staff about the nature and effects of workplace bullying, but it is left up to each staff member to interpret what bullying looks like and behave accordingly, thus putting the emphasis for bullying prevention on individual workers. In contrast, our solution addresses bullying as an organisational issue through proactive health and safety risk management.

**Key Message**

Effective workplace bullying prevention requires not only strategies that target bullying behaviour, but also a systematic organisational-focussed approach to managing the underlying organisational risk factors that give rise to bullying.

**Bullying as a Work Health and Safety Hazard**

Workplace bullying, together with other factors like fatigue, work pressure, and role overload are considered psychosocial hazards: potential sources of harm that arise from the way that work is designed and managed. These hazards can be addressed through a risk management process – a systematic way of identifying, analysing, and eliminating or reducing potential sources of harm.<sup>22</sup> The risk management of psychosocial hazards follows the same steps as those used to manage risks to physical work health and safety hazards, as outlined in **Figure 1**.



**Figure 1.** A Summary of the Risk Management Process for Psychosocial Hazards

<sup>21</sup> Salin, 2003

<sup>22</sup> Safe Work Australia, 2014

In brief, the first step involves identifying hazards that have the potential to impact on the mental health of workers, such as exposure to workplace bullying.

Second, the potential for harm resulting from exposure to the hazards needs to be assessed, and the risk factors understood in detail. A risk audit tool, such as the one discussed in this submission, can provide important information at this step regarding the factors in a workplace that may increase the risk of workplace bullying. Conducting a thorough risk audit is also vital to inform the next stage in which risks are controlled.

Third, based on the risk assessment process, measures are put in place to control the risks. Organisations should eliminate and reduce the risks as far as is reasonably practical, as close to the root cause as possible.<sup>23</sup> In the case of workplace bullying, a combination of preventative and interventive measures at the organisational and individual levels should be considered, starting with designing and implementing safe systems of work.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, the control measures should be regularly reviewed to see whether they have been effective in managing the risks, and whether other risk factors need addressing. A risk audit tool forms a central part of this evaluation process, complemented by discussions with staff from all levels of organisation and review of other data sources (e.g., absenteeism, injury records).

Workers should be involved in each stage of the risk management process, through sharing information and seeking their input. In particular, staff should be consulted to identify potential hazards; understand the risks involved; and in designing, implementing, and evaluating the effectiveness of risk controls. In relation to the risk management of workplace bullying, staff can elaborate on the policies, procedures, practices, and work systems that contribute to bullying, and take the lead in designing and implementing the potential solutions.

#### **Key Message**

Managing bullying as a work health and safety hazard should take place through a risk management process that systematically identifies, assesses, controls, and reviews the organisational risk factors. A risk audit tool is vital for assessing the risks, informing the development of measures to control the risks, and determining the effectiveness of the risk control measures.

#### **Risk Management of Bullying at Work using the New Evidence-Based Risk Audit Tool**

A general principle of the risk management framework is that risks are best controlled by addressing risk factors in the work environment and systems of work (organisational risk factors). Focussing on the behaviour of workers is considered least effective, as it does not address the inherent risks in the work situation. Supporting behaviour change may, however, be a useful strategy to supplement changes to the work environment and systems of work. In the context of workplace bullying, this means that risks arising from organisational policies,

---

<sup>23</sup> SafeWork Australia, 2018

<sup>24</sup> SafeWork Australia, 2016

procedures, processes, and practices in key areas of organisational functioning must be addressed to prevent bullying behaviour, rather than solely focussing on bullying behaviour itself.

#### **Key Message**

The risk management process should focus on the organisational risk factors for workplace bullying, specifically those found in the work environment and systems of work.

The risk audit tool that we have developed through six years of research and validated in South Australian hospitals provides an evidence-based foundation for bullying prevention by improving the work environment and systems of work. The tool promotes sustainable and effective workplace bullying prevention by focussing on the root causes of the problem.

#### ***A unique focus***

The risk audit tool aims to tackle the underlying risk conditions for workplace bullying by identifying, monitoring, and improving structural aspects of the organisation, with the input from workers and supervisors/managers. Rather than treating bullying as an interpersonal problem between co-workers, the tool focuses on key task and personnel management functions as the core risk factors for bullying. It provides guidance on how to change the underlying risks of bullying from a work design point-of-view, thereby moving from a focus on the individuals to a focus on the organisation.

The tool identifies the risk of bullying in ten different areas of organisational functioning (e.g., allocating tasks and roles, managing under-performance, appraising and rewarding performance). In doing so, it provides information on where the risks of bullying lie in the work environment and systems of work, and most importantly where the focal points should be for risk management efforts.

#### **Key Message**

The new evidence-based risk audit tool, validated in South Australian hospitals, supports sustainable and effective workplace bullying prevention by focussing on the root causes.

#### ***Applications of the tool***

Managers, human resources and organisational development professionals, and work health and safety specialists can use the risk audit tool to:

- Identify the organisational risk factors for workplace bullying, and use this data to inform sustainable and effective bullying prevention;
- Respond to informal bullying complaints in a proactive way to reduce the likelihood that the matter escalates into ongoing bullying;
- Respond to formal bullying complaints in a way that doesn't vilify individuals and which uncovers information about how to prevent bullying in the future; and
- Meet duty of care obligations under work health and safety legislation, to provide a safe working environment by managing psychosocial hazards.

For national and state work health and safety regulators, the risk audit tool can:

- Assist education efforts by guiding proactive risk management of bullying in client organisations; and
- Assist compliance activities by focussing bullying investigations, providing a more objective form of evidence, aiding decision making in relation to bullying matters, and offering guidance for how organisations can meet their duty of care under the law.

Unions and employee representatives can use the risk audit tool to:

- Gather evidence of the underlying causes of bullying experienced by their members; and
- Advocate for workplace changes to protect their members' interests.

### ***Development of the tool***

The risk audit tool was developed through three distinct stages of research.

**Stage 1:** To identify the risk factors for workplace bullying, we examined the official case records of 342 workplace bullying complaints lodged by South Australian workers with the SafeWork SA. The data consisted of over 5,500 pages of single-spaced case-related information.<sup>25</sup> The complaint records provided a rich overview of the factors, procedures, and events that complainants perceived as fundamental to their experiences of bullying at work. Content analysis of these bullying complaint files revealed that perceptions of bullying arise when supervisors (or other employees holding a coordinating role) perform a set of core people and task management functions (e.g., clarifying and defining job roles; managing tasks and workload).<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the case analysis, we conducted critical incident interviews with Australian workers, managers, and work health and safety representatives from a range of industries. Interviewees were asked to recount detailed examples of their experiences of effective and ineffective behaviour for each area of people and task management identified in the case files. This step was an important way of going beyond the experiences of bullied employees, to gather information on the work environment and systems of work and relevant behavioural indicators. These, interviews together with the analysis of the workplace bullying complaints, generated a set of behavioural indicators for the risk audit tool.

**Stage 2:** The set of behavioural indicators were validated by independent participants by retranslating them (i.e., sorting them) into the originally coded people and task management functional risk areas. The indicators were then rated in terms of effectiveness. The end point from this series of studies was a behaviourally anchored risk audit tool, presented in ten graphical scales, comprising 96 behavioural indicators.

**Stage 3:** The risk audit tool was then evaluated for its capacity to predict workplace bullying exposure, and to discriminate high, medium, and low risk work units based on a range of work health and safety criteria. The primary validation study was conducted in 25 teams from three South Australian hospitals, in which 212 individual team members completed the tool.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Tuckey *et al.*, 2015

<sup>26</sup> Tuckey *et al.*, 2015

<sup>27</sup> Tuckey *et al.*, 2017

The results of this study showed that the whole team score on the risk audit tool predicts exposure to bullying, beyond six 'known' work-related antecedents of workplace bullying from the scientific literature (role clarity, role conflict, role overload, work constraints, job autonomy, and organisational fairness).<sup>28</sup> The results also demonstrated that the risk audit tool discriminates amongst hospital work units rated as high, medium, and low risk according to health and safety criteria drawn from objective organisational data (patient safety incidents, staff safety incidents, absenteeism) and data from an independent survey (workplace bullying, violence, and threatening behaviours).

## References

- Ariza-Montes, A., Muniz, N. M., Montero-Simó, M. J. & Araque-Padilla, R. A. (2013). Workplace bullying among healthcare workers. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *10*, 3121-3139. doi:10.3390/ijerph10083121
- Bowling, N. A., & Beehr, T. A. (2006). Workplace harassment from the victim's perspective: A theoretical model and meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *91*, 998-1012. doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.91.5.998.
- Caponecchia, C., Branch, S., & Murray, J. P. (2019). Development of a Taxonomy of Workplace Bullying Intervention Types: Informing Research Directions and Supporting Organizational Decision Making. *Group & Organization Management*, 1059601118820966.
- Francioli, L., Høgh, A., Conway, P. M., Costa, G., Karasek, R. & Hansen, Å. M. (2015). Do personal dispositions affect the relationship between psychosocial working conditions and workplace bullying? *Ethics & Behavior*, *26*, 451-469. doi:10.1080/10508422.2015.1043367.
- Hodgins, M., McNamara, P., MacCurtain, S. (2014) Workplace bullying and incivility: A systematic review of interventions. *International Journal of Workplace Health Management*, *7*, 54-72.
- Hutchinson, M., Vickers, M., Jackson, D. & Wilkes, L. (2006). Workplace bullying in nursing: Towards a more critical organisational perspective. *Nursing Inquiry*, *13*, 118-126. doi: 10.1111/j.1440-1800.2006.00314.x.
- Hutchinson, M., Vickers, M., Wilkes, L. & Jackson, D. (2010). A typology of bullying behaviours: The experiences of Australian nurses. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, *19*, 2319-2328. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2702.2009.03160.x
- McClinton, S., Dollard, M. F., Tuckey, M. R., & Bailey, T. S. (2014). The prevalence and nature of bullying: A national study of Australian workers. *Journal of Health, Safety and Environment*, *30*(2), 283-300.

---

<sup>28</sup> Tuckey *et al.*, 2017

- Nielsen, M. B. & Einarsen, S. (2012). Outcomes of exposure to workplace bullying: A meta-analytic review. *Work & Stress*, 26, 309-332.
- Nielsen, M. B., Glasø, L. & Einarsen, S. (2017). Exposure to workplace harassment and the Five Factor Model of personality: A meta-analysis. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 104, 195-206. doi: 10.1016/j.paid.2016.08.015
- Neall, A. M., & Tuckey, M. R. (2014). A methodological review of research on the antecedents and consequences of workplace harassment. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 87(2), 225-257. doi:10.1111/joop.12059.
- Parliament of Australia (2012). Workplace bullying: We just want it to stop – Report from the Inquiry into workplace bullying. Retrieved from: [https://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary\\_business/committees/house\\_of\\_representatives\\_committees?url=ee/bullying/report.htm](https://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/house_of_representatives_committees?url=ee/bullying/report.htm)
- Potter, R. E., Dollard, M. F., & Tuckey, M. R. (2016). *Bullying & Harassment in Australian Workplaces: Results from the Australian Workplace Barometer Project 2014/15*. Canberra Australia: Safe Work Australia. ISBN: 978-1-76028-919-5. Retrieved from: <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/sites/SWA/about/Publications/Documents/985/bullying-and-harassment-in-australian-workplaces-australian-workplace-barometer-results.pdf>
- Safe Work Australia (2014). *Preventing Psychological Injury Under Work Health and Safety Laws* [Fact Sheet]. Retrieved from: <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/system/files/documents/1702/preventing-psychological-injury-under-whs-laws.pdf>
- SafeWork Australia (2016, May). *Guide for preventing and responding to workplace bullying*. Retrieved from <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/system/files/documents/1702/guide-preventing-responding-workplace-bullying.pdf>
- SafeWork Australia (2018). How to manage work health and safety risks: Code of practice. Retrieved from [https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/system/files/documents/1901/code\\_of\\_practice\\_-\\_how\\_to\\_manage\\_work\\_health\\_and\\_safety\\_risks\\_1.pdf](https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/system/files/documents/1901/code_of_practice_-_how_to_manage_work_health_and_safety_risks_1.pdf)
- Salin, D. (2003). Ways of explaining workplace bullying: A review of enabling, motivating and precipitating structures and processes in the work environment. *Human Relations* 56(10), 1213-1232.
- Samnani, A.-K., & Singh, P. (2012). 20 years of workplace bullying research: A review of the antecedents and consequences of bullying in the workplace. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 17, 581-589. doi: 10.1016/j.avb.2012.08.004
- Skogstad, A., Torsheim, T., Einarsen, S. & Hauge, L. J. (2011). Testing the work environment hypothesis of bullying on a group level of analysis: Psychosocial factors as precursors of observed workplace bullying. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 60, 475-495. doi: 10.1111/j.1464-0597.2011.00444.x

- Tuckey, M. R., & Neall, A. M. (2014). Workplace bullying erodes job and personal resources: Between- and within-person perspectives. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 19*, 413-424. doi: 10.1037/a0037728
- Tuckey, M. R., Chrisopoulos, S., & Dollard, M. F. (2012). Job demands, resource deficiencies, and workplace harassment: Evidence for micro-level effects. *International Journal of Stress Management, 19*(4), 292-310. doi: 10.1037/a0030317
- Tuckey, M. R., Dollard, M. F., Hosking, P. J., & Winefield, A. H. (2009). Workplace bullying: The role of psychosocial work environment factors. *International Journal of Stress Management, 16*, 215-232. doi: 10.1037/a0016841
- Tuckey, M., Zadow, A., Li, Y., & Caponecchia, C. (in press). Prevention of workplace bullying through work and organisational design. In P. D'Cruz, E. Noronha, C. Caponecchia, J. Escartín, D. Salin, M. R. Tuckey (Eds.). *Workplace Bullying: Dignity and Inclusion at Work*. Springer Singapore
- Tuckey, M.R., Li, Y. Chen, P.Y., Dollard, M.F., McLinton, S., Rogers, A., & Neall, A.M. (2015). *Prevention of workplace bullying through risk assessment: Final project report*. Adelaide, Australia: Asia Pacific Centre for Work Health and Safety. DOI: 10.4225/50/5759F7C5354D5. Retrieved from: <http://apo.org.au/node/64434>
- Tuckey, M. R., Li, Y., Neall, A. M., Mattiske, J. D., Chen, P. Y. & Dollard, M. F. (2017). *Developing a workplace bullying risk audit tool: Final project report*. Adelaide, Australia: Asia Pacific Centre for Work Health and Safety. DOI: 10.4225/50/5afe1aeecff6e
- Varita, M. A-L. (2001). Consequences of workplace bullying with respect to the well-being of its targets and the observers of bullying. *Scandinavian Journal of Work Environmental Health, 27*, 63-69. doi:10.5271/sjweh.588