The STAR Project—Standing Together Against Racism

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Aims: The STAR Project aims to encourage health students and staff to shift from being bystanders of racism to ‘taking it on’. Another aim was to contribute to the national anti-racism strategy ‘Racism: It stops with me’.

Methods: Reports about racism come from students, staff and from anonymous polling of whole classes of students using electronic touch pads, including in rural areas.

A working group had a competition to devise anti-racist slogans or symbols that might appeal to a broad spectrum of health students and professionals. A focus group considered the efficacy of the entries. The slogan was selected as it was a common phrase akin to ‘Close the Gap’ and because its acronym, STAR, was optimistic and versatile. The yellow STAR represents hope and the entwined stethoscope is a multidisciplinary health tool.

STAR was launched in mid-September at the Australian Medical Students’ Association Global Health Conference. This included the production of badges, stickers, a webpage, and Facebook and Twitter. Since then it has been intensively marketed to health staff and students’ organisations.

Relevance: We continue to receive feedback from staff and students that racism remains common in health study and services. Using touch pads in a class of 190, 21% reported observing racism in study settings and 93% had observed racism in clinical settings. Less than 7% reported responding to racism at the time, while 74% said they felt they should respond, but did not. Of these, 93% said they would like to learn the skills to do this. Reasons for not responding were ‘Not having the skills’ (36%), ‘Fear of backlash’ (61%) or because ‘It was not their business’ (3%). The school has been trialling educating students about the nature of racism, the skills to respond effectively and building moral courage.

Results: There are early anecdotal findings of the benefits of teaching that racism makes people physically sick and inferring ‘We would not tolerate smoking in health services—so why racism?’

Initial responses to the STAR Project have been exactly as hoped for—people ask ‘What is that for’ and when told almost everyone says ‘Where can I get one?’

Conclusions: The fate of the STAR Project will be clearer at the NRHA Conference. The interaction between staff and students has been an excellent base for helping students develop organisational and advocacy skills and to develop greater understanding of racism.