TWO-thirds of Australian medical students have experienced “teaching by humiliation” during clinical rotations, according to research published in the Medical Journal of Australia.

An anonymous survey of 146 students at the University of Sydney and the University of Melbourne found that 74% had been humiliated during their clinical rotations, and 83% had witnessed it.

Dr Karen Scott, Senior Lecturer at the University of Sydney, and her coauthors reported that the “humiliating and intimidating behaviours students experienced were mostly more subtle than overt and included aggressive and abusive questioning techniques”.

“The students’ responses to these practices ranged from disgust and regret about entering the medical profession to endorsement of teachers’ public exposure of a student’s poor knowledge.”

Subtle forms of humiliation included teachers being nasty, rude or hostile, and their belittling of students. The more overt behaviours associated with teaching by humiliation included yelling, shouting, cursing and swearing at students, the authors wrote.

Additionally, the survey showed that it wasn’t just medical or surgical teachers being rude to students.

“The specific professional group most frequently named was nursing and midwifery, reported by 59% of University of Melbourne students and 35% of University of Sydney students. Administrative staff were also named”, the authors wrote.

Perhaps surprisingly, up to half the students in the survey who had experienced or witnessed teaching by humiliation considered it to be “useful to learning” and “the natural socialisation of a good doctor”.

“As a cultural matter, mistreatment of students requires multilevel and long-term action, especially if commitment of resources to the professionalism curricula is to be productive”, the researchers concluded.

“The profession and the discipline of medical education would benefit from research to understand the complexity of factors that allows the cultural practices to be perpetuated and to identify ways to shift the culture.

“At the same time, current and future teachers deserve meaningful, ongoing support and professional development, and students deserve support to be assertive and resilient.”

Please acknowledge the Medical Journal of Australia (MJA) as the source of this article

The Medical Journal of Australia is a publication of the Australian Medical Association.

The statements or opinions that are expressed in the MJA reflect the views of the authors and do not represent the official policy of the AMA or the MJA unless that is so stated.

CONTACTS: Dr Karen Scott 02 9845 3385 or karen.scott@health.nsw.gov.au
Dr Jenny Barrett j.barrett@unimelb.edu.au