

Editorials

The other pandemic

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Brain disorders are the leading global cause of death and disability. The challenges of understanding them so we can develop treatments and cures are huge. We need a diverse, capable, supported research network. The Organization for Human Brain Mapping has always attracted a broad range of members, people from different disciplines, countries, and methodological approaches. We have prized transparency and reproducibility in reportage via our Open Science initiatives, and an inclusive culture via diversity and mentoring awards. However, academic and research workplaces have high rates of bullying and harassment, affecting many of our members: an unspoken pandemic. We cannot lose talent because we lack the courage to confront uncomfortable truths. The winner of the 2025 Mentor Award reflects on navigating unsafe and damaging workplace cultures and the practice of mentoring via encouragement, support and protection. OHBM members can actively shape a culture where harassment and bullying are not tolerated. We can ensure that OHBM, as our peak professional body, sets expectations for behaviour for its members, and rewards those who support safe and productive workplaces. We can act as an international mentor to our members, supporting, guiding, even protecting, to ensure their success.

At the 2025 Organization for Human Brain Mapping (OHBM) meeting, I was incredibly honoured to receive the Mentor Award. I am fortunate to have been mentored by truly magnificent people and worked with inspirational, brilliant colleagues. In my brief thank you speech, I said that great mentors create great mentors, and that it is our mentees who teach us the most. Sitting in the audience that evening, watching amazing researchers and colleagues being awarded, I felt very fortunate to be part of such a community. I reflected on the letters that I received when I was nominated for the award, which were both humbling and moving. When I asked those nominators, all current and prior mentees, what they liked about my mentoring, there was one consistent and powerful theme: tough love. They spoke of my high expectations for them and their careers, and for myself as a mentor: to encourage, support, and protect them. When I asked, “protect you from what?”, the responses were protection from difficult research climates, adversarial senior researchers, and sometimes frankly hostile working environments. It made me reflect that a role of a good mentor was to guide mentees through troubled waters, helping to ensure their safety and success.

My first OHBM was in 2002 in Sendai, while I was doing my PhD under the supervision of an OHBM luminary, Aina

Puce. I loved it: days spent working and playing with a bunch of computational scientists, engineers, neuroscientists and clinician-researchers fascinated by the workings of the brain. I loved the culture of inclusivity, the open excitement for the science, and the international mix. I met another future mentor there, Marsel Mesulam. I remember having what I thought was a very earnest and erudite discussion on neurovascular coupling and whether BOLD signal really represented neuronal activation (remember that functional magnetic resonance imaging [fMRI], even task-based, was huge then). Marsel listened for a while, looked at me quizzically, and said that sometimes he thought that it was just divine grace. I roared with laughter, and 2 years later commenced my post-doc, and my cognitive neurology career, in his group.

Reflecting on the highs of 25 years in imaging research also made me ponder the lows that contributed to burnout, and there have been many. The pandemic – singularly brutal for anyone working in clinical research and as a clinician. The usual: paper rejections, unsuccessful grants, the impossibility of juggling life and clinical work and research. But also, the specific, including my experience of sexual harassment as a neurology trainee, and much later, bullying and defamation from a very senior researcher who, by his

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own admission in formal mediation, sought to ruin my career. I recalled the experiences of friends and colleagues, whom I have seen move departments, research streams, states, and even countries to escape harassment. Those who have triumphed at great personal cost. Those who have left research as they perceived the toll of staying to be too high. The emotional costs and psychological tolls as they have tried to navigate systems that were established to reward bad behaviour.

As part of the 2025 meeting, I was invited as one of three mid-senior career researchers to speak on burnout and how to avoid it, chaired by Lucina Uddin and organised by early career researcher Katie Moran. The mentoring session was on the Thursday morning, and people were still waking up from the night before. Daniel Margulies was the first speaker and was funny and lively, essentially a session of raw stand-up comedy, hilarious and charmingly chaotic. The second speaker was Peter Bandettini, a founding father of OHBM, who gave a grounding talk, methodical and measured, a pipeline for a successful career in the United States system.

I spoke on my experience as a clinician-researcher. I started with the notion of *ahimsā*, or non-violence, as a guiding principle for living a fulfilling life as a researcher. *Ahimsā* is the first and the most directive of the 5 *yamas* compiled by Patañjali, often interpreted as the “thou shalt nots” of yogic practice.¹ But unlike the First Commandment, this exhortation extends not just to the perpetrator of the deed, the protagonist of the act, but to any person who aids, abets or benefits from the violent action. That is, we should aim for non-violence in our thoughts, our words and our actions. Harm can ensue from both doing violence, and by not speaking out if our words may intervene. Silence can be an act of violence.

I spoke on other things too, about the chaos of life as a clinician-researcher, a parent and partner, mentor and mentee. One of the last points was speaking up about the hidden pandemic affecting particularly women researchers: that of sexual harassment and discrimination. I stated that while it gave me a singular joy when younger colleagues professed that this was never part of their experience, that sadly, infuriatingly, this was not always the case. Many of the questions in the Q&A that followed were about what to do and how to support those affected. My response? Believe them.

At the end of the session, as I left the podium, a wave of people came to me. Mostly women, but not all. All emotional, some sobbing. The next hour was spent hearing stories we thought we had left behind last century. Trying to give advice to young women in different countries experiencing terrible harassment and bullying from senior people in the imaging community. My colleague, friend and mentee, Natalia Egorova-Brumley, stayed with me, as she and I had been planning a coffee in the break. When we eventually had that coffee to debrief, I spoke with other old colleagues about what had just happened. Story after story after story of ongoing unacceptable behaviours were recounted. And this is all happening on our watch.

Michel Foucault hypothesised that power was not a possession held by an individual but rather a relational network that shaped and formed culture through a combination of knowledge and discipline. The academic power structures in which we all work are designed to protect bad behaviour. The frameworks that give us our employment emphasise productivity, prizes, and impact. Terrible, unforgiveable behaviours are overlooked because that person just got the front cover of *Nature*, a huge grant, or “*might get the Nobel prize someday*”. In academic circles, it seems that bullies are always rewarded. I remember I was appalled when this was said by a colleague in an academic leadership course I did 15 years ago. She was right. The most elite prize in science cannot be awarded posthumously – as Rosalind Franklin’s bitter example illustrates – but also cannot be taken away for any infractions. Carleton Gajdusek was awarded the Nobel prize for his description of kuru and remained an invited speaker to the end of his days despite being a convicted and briefly incarcerated paedophile.² James Watson retains his Nobel prize even in the face of shockingly sexist and racist statements.³

Organisational context matters, as does workplace culture. We cannot forget that while our researchers are coming to OHBM meetings for a celebration of discovery and learning, they all must return to their institutions at the end of the day where their levels of safety vary. Both organisational context factors and personality traits have been shown to influence self-reports of sexually harassing behaviours toward women.⁴ Four organisation context factors have been identified: a permissive workplace climate, a masculinised job/gender context, the capacity for unsupervised male/female contact, and a norm of contest culture.⁴ How many of us have worked in groups that tick every box?

Academia has some of the highest rates of workplace bullying.⁵ In academic medicine, burnout disproportionately affects our women faculty.^{6,7} Harassment has been a key factor leading to ‘brain drain’ and STEM faculty leaving the workforce.⁸ Factors that significantly increase burnout include poor workplace cultures and a “workplace sexual harassment experience in the last 2 years”.⁷ I would argue that the experience could be at any time in your career, as these experiences have lasting effects. These challenges are greater among those who are from historically marginalised groups.⁹ The decision to leave can be additionally financially fraught, as in many countries, the burden is placed on the reporting party rather than the accused. The onus is then on the reporting party to notify any funding bodies, which triggers a cascade of investigations. The potential outcome could be that the funding of that person is withdrawn, depriving them of their salary and in turn jeopardising the salaries of all colleagues on the project.

OHBM Special Interest Groups (SIGs) have a long history of representation for issues that matter to our members. We have the Sustainability and Environmental Action SIG to try to mitigate the harms to our planet. We have lobbied to ensure that the sites chosen for each meeting are in places where our LGBTQIA+ and gender-diverse members can feel safe and accepted. Our Open Science initiatives have endorsed a culture of transparent enquiry that is commend-

able. We have a Women Faculty SIG to increase representation of our female colleagues and address “gender-specific barriers in their work as human brain mappers”. We already set diversity and inclusion standards. We were one of the first organisations of which I am a member to establish a Code of Conduct, and it is very clear that anyone attending our meetings must abide by these principles. I hope this makes our meetings as fun, safe and inclusive now as they were when I first started attending almost 25 years ago.

In the twenty-first century, brain disorders are the leading cause of death in many countries.¹⁰ The challenges of understanding them so we can develop treatments and cures are huge. We need a diverse, capable, supported research network. We cannot lose talent because we lack the courage to confront uncomfortable truths. I acknowledge that as an organisation we cannot dictate the culture of every brain imaging group in the world. But we can ensure that those who express their experiences are believed and supported when we come together. OHBM must actively shape a culture where harassment and bullying are not tolerated, and where safe research environments are a core expectation for membership. Proposed keynote speakers, panellists, and award recipients should be required to adhere to the Code of Conduct, with a transparent mechanism for reporting concerns. We already make diversity, mentorship, and workplace culture part of the evaluation criteria for leadership roles and prizes such as the Mentor Award and Diversity & Inclusivity Champion Award. We should make this a central mechanism for all awards, especially life

achievements. We can ensure that OHBM, as our peak professional body, sets expectations for behaviour for its members and rewards those that support safe and productive workplaces. We can act as an international mentor, supporting, guiding, even protecting. This can be done by us all, in thoughts, words, and actions.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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