

Jewish doctors face rising antisemitism from NHS colleagues

Dozens of incidents have been reported since October 7. Some staff say their complaints have gone unanswered and accuse their bosses of double standards

Harry Yorke 8th December 2024 Sunday Times

During her long and distinguished NHS career, Elizabeth had rarely experienced antisemitism in the workplace. That was until June last year, a few months after the senior consultant, who is Jewish, began working for a new trust in a London borough. She was discussing Orthodox Jews with a colleague as part of a conversation on how to communicate health messages to marginalised groups. “I was introducing myself to a colleague and I was talking about how sometimes it’s very hard to reach that community, because there’s a lot of fear about statutory services getting involved,” she said. “She said, ‘Yes, there’s a lot of fear about it, but you know of course they [Jews] are everywhere, because they believe there is going to be another Holocaust and they continue to reproduce.’” She carried on talking and after a while I said, ‘Actually, I know something about some of the beliefs they have, because I am Jewish’. She just said, ‘Oh my goodness, why didn’t you tell me?’ She was mortified.”

Elizabeth was shocked by the encounter, not least because the clinician was the head of a medical discipline and was required to engage regularly with the community. Since the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7 last year, she and other Jewish medics say they have observed an increase in anti-Jewish hatred from NHS colleagues, both online and in daily life. They also say staff are displaying political support for Palestine in ways that are affecting Jewish colleagues and patients.

In the 12 months after October 7, more than 5,500 antisemitic incidents were recorded in Britain, a threefold increase on the previous year.

According to the Community Security Trust (CST), a charity established to protect the British Jewish community, 78 antisemitic incidents have been reported in the health sector over the past 14 months. Of these, 42 were perpetrated by healthcare professionals.

During this period, the Jewish Medical Association submitted 28 complaints to the General Medical Council (GMC), which regulates the conduct of doctors. In the 12 months before October 7, it submitted one. Jewish leaders are due to meet this week with Wes Streeting, the health secretary, to urge the government to act. All the medics who spoke to The Sunday Times requested anonymity.

Death threats to children

After October 7, Elizabeth’s London trust offered little support to Jewish employees. That December, a message to staff was sent via its internal weekly bulletin. It noted a recent rise in Islamophobia and provided information on where affected colleagues could receive help. No such communication had been sent in relation to antisemitism. Elizabeth asked the trust to redraft the message, noting the rise in antisemitism alongside Islamophobia. When the new draft was submitted, she said a senior figure removed the description of October 7 as a “massacre”. She was told it was “too activating for people” and there was “context” surrounding the attack.

Hannah, a speech and language therapist working at another London trust, had a similar experience. She said the atrocity felt to “me and a lot of Jewish people like a bereavement”. Her children received death threats. She had worked in a “really nice and supportive team”, but Hannah said that when she and other Jewish colleagues explained to leaders “how difficult we were finding it and we needed some support”, she was told by one manager this was not possible “because in the trust we need to be fair to both sides”. While Hannah later spoke to other managers and things improved, she found the initial response “ignorant and very polarising”.

Several weeks later, she and others were alerted that a colleague had been posting “really disgusting, antisemitic” content on social media. This included imagery invoking the blood libel (an antisemitic canard that Jews in antiquity used Christian blood in rituals) and the Holocaust, as well as “poems about Israeli children living on other children’s graves”. One picture, she said, depicted “two trenches

filled with bodies, one showing Jewish skeletons from the Holocaust” and the second body bags “that said [they] were from Gaza” — drawing direct parallels between the Nazis and Israel.

Hannah and her colleagues filed a complaint to the trust last December. A year on there has been no resolution and she has received no formal update, despite repeated requests. Several of her Jewish friends working in the trust had left because of the working environment. Hannah herself is considering leaving the NHS entirely. “There’s a double standard and it’s institutional,” she said.

Commenting on the disclosures, Streeting said: “There is no place for antisemitism in the NHS and I will not stand anyone being subjected to abuse or intimidation. We have a zero-tolerance policy and NHS organisations have a responsibility to protect staff and patients. I expect employers and regulators like the General Medical Council, to take action against anyone working in the health service who promotes hatred against Jewish people.”

Doctors wear Palestinian symbols

Jewish patients are also being affected, according to the CST. Abigail, a senior doctor at another London trust, said she was aware of two cases where parents of Jewish children had become involved in altercations with doctors wearing pro-Palestinian badges or symbols.

In June, she said, a paediatrician from another trust went to a specialist school for an appointment with a disabled Jewish child. The child’s mother noticed the doctor, who was not Palestinian, wearing a lanyard with a pro-Palestine slogan. When the mother challenged the doctor, Abigail said they got into an upsetting disagreement and the mother asked her not to examine her son. The mother has filed a complaint with the paediatrician’s hospital.

In her trust, Abigail recalled an incident in September in which a young Jewish child was receiving treatment for a broken arm. A junior doctor treating them was wearing a lanyard with the Palestinian flag and a necklace shaped as a Palestinian state without Israel. Such imagery is seen by many Jewish people as antisemitic because it suggests Israel should not exist. “Again a verbal disagreement got under way, which interfered with the treatment of the child,” she said. The mother also made a complaint to the doctor’s department, which was resolved amicably. However, Abigail questioned why, given the trust’s policy of prohibiting political badges at work, the incident happened at all.

The 78 cases of antisemitism recorded by the CST include that of a couple who said that when speaking to an NHS staff member about their care they were asked whether they were Jewish. On confirming this, the staff member is said to have replied: “Well, you’ll have lots of money for care, Jewish people are very rich.” In May, a Jewish woman leaving a hospital was shouted at by a staff member: “Get your Jewish ambulance to come and get you.”

Dave Rich, head of policy at the CST, said the experiences of Jewish staff and patients had been “utterly shocking”. “The NHS is a national institution that is supposed to represent the best of this country, but instead it has allowed politics to intrude in a way that is completely unacceptable. There should be a complete ban on the wearing of any political symbols or badges by healthcare professionals on duty.”

Chris Hopson, chief strategy officer for NHS England, said: “It is totally unacceptable for anyone to experience racism, discrimination or prejudice in the health service, and the NHS takes any report of antisemitism extremely seriously. All trusts and NHS healthcare providers should have robust policies in place to deal with any incidents appropriately.”

Commenting on the disclosures, Streeting said: “There is no place for antisemitism in the NHS and I will not stand anyone being subjected to abuse or intimidation. We have a zero-tolerance policy and NHS organisations have a responsibility to protect staff and patients. “I expect employers and regulators like the General Medical Council, to take action against anyone working in the health service who promotes hatred against Jewish people.”

Slow to act on complaints

While several medics said their trusts were acting on concerns, others have warned there is a lack of consistency because trusts have a large degree of autonomy from NHS England, including over their disciplinary procedures. Complaints relating to more serious incidents have been submitted to the GMC, which has the power to strike off doctors found in breach of its professional standards code.

Dr Fiona Sim, a member of the Jewish Medical Association (JMA) and a former chairwoman of the Royal Society for Public Health, said that in the past 12 months she had been made aware of more than 100 cases of antisemitism, 28 of which — the “really serious ones” — had led to the JMA submitting formal complaints to the GMC. However, Sim and colleagues at the JMA are concerned that seemingly clear-cut cases have yet to result in action. This includes a complaint against Dr Wahid Shaida, a GP in Harrow, northwest London, who was unmasked last year as the leader of the now proscribed Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir. Shaida, who praised October 7 as a “welcome punch on the nose” for Israel, was suspended by NHS England in January but the suspension was lifted in July because NHS England said there “insufficient evidence” to suggest he was unfit for medical practice. The GMC’s investigation continues. Sim queried why the GMC has not sought an interim order of suspension.

Of all the complaints submitted to the GMC since October 7, Sim said that JMA was aware of only one — involving Dr Asif Munaf, a former contestant on the BBC’s *The Apprentice*, who made antisemitic remarks online — that had resulted in an interim suspension (*note: one other suspension of Dr R Ali was reported on 20th December*)

The GMC said that while it was responsible for referring doctors for interim suspensions, the decision on whether to do so was decided by independent tribunals run by the Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service. It refused to say whether Shaida had been referred. A spokesman added: “We are very clear that any form of antisemitism is completely unacceptable.”

It will take action not words to stem NHS antisemitism

Jawad Iqbal 9th December 2024 Times

The National Health Service, along with the General Medical Council (GMC), which regulates doctors, claims to take reports of antisemitism very seriously. Yet questions must be asked about whether health chiefs really mean what they say, at a time when growing numbers of Jewish doctors claim to be facing rising antisemitism from colleagues in the NHS.

The case of a London doctor who was unmasked last year as the leader of the now-banned Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir tells its own story. Dr Wahid Shaida, a GP in Harrow, northwest London, praised the Hamas attack on October 7 as a “welcome punch on the nose” for Israel. He was suspended in January, yet he remained on the GMC register.

His suspension was eventually lifted in July after NHS England said there was “insufficient evidence” to suggest he was unfit for medical practice and that there was no evidence he had been involved with Hizb ut-Tahrir since it was proscribed. The group is dedicated to creating an Islamic “caliphate” and was banned in Britain in January. James Cleverly, then the home secretary, called the group “antisemitic” and warned it “promotes and encourages terrorism”.

The GMC’s investigation into Shaida continues. It says that while it is responsible for referring doctors for interim suspensions, the final say on whether to do so is the responsibility of the independent tribunals run by the Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service. The GMC has refused to say whether Shaida had been referred.

The wider context is relevant. In the 12 months after October 7, more than 5,500 antisemitic incidents were recorded in Britain, a threefold increase on the previous year. According to the Community Security Trust (CST), a charity established to protect the British Jewish community, 78 antisemitic incidents have been reported in the health sector over the past 14 months. Of

Dr Fiona Sim, a member of the Jewish Medical Association (JMA), said that in the past 12 months she had been made aware of more than 100 cases of antisemitism, 28 of which — “the really serious ones” — had led to the JMA submitting formal complaints to the GMC. Yet there has been little in the way of formal action, suggesting a broader health service culture of buck passing and looking the other way.

Wes Streeting, the health secretary, insists that there is no place for antisemitism in the NHS, adding: “I expect employers and regulators like the General Medical Council to take action against anyone working in the health service who promotes hatred against Jewish people.” Fine words but it is action that is required.