

Should I come out at work?

REFLECTIONS

AUTHOR

Dr Jane Doherty

Yorkshire and Humber Deanery
(she/her)

Address for Correspondence

Dr Jane Doherty
Scunthorpe General Hospital,
Scunthorpe DN15 7BH

Email: janed@doctors.org.uk

No conflicts of interest to declare

Accepted for publication: 01.04.21

“How was your weekend?”

“Good, my partner and I went for a nice walk.”

“Oh, is he a doctor too?”

This is a topic of conversation that comes up regularly in polite small talk at work. Yet, I am increasingly second-guessing how best to respond to the latter question.

A year ago, I would have just corrected the other person without thinking and moved on. In my previous rotations, being a lesbian had never been an issue. People might have been a little surprised when they found out that my partner was a woman, but they were never unkind. Perhaps, this was my experience because I was working in a large tertiary hospital in a big city, with a really diverse population of staff.

However, at the beginning of 2020 I moved to a smaller, more rural district hospital. Before I had a chance to ‘come out’ to my colleagues, I had several experiences where people expressed their negative opinions about LGBTQ+ people in passing conversation. For example, one registrar told me that she had walked past a Pride parade when on holiday with her family, and that she had to escape quickly as she felt that “the gays and the lesbians are a bad influence on children”. Following this a consultant told me that he had stopped listening to a well-known singer because he had come out as gay. When I tried to talk to a couple of other junior doctors about how this made me feel, their immediate reaction was to defend the people who had made these statements – for example, commenting that “they aren’t from this generation” or “maybe they didn’t mean it like that”. I felt like these remarks normalised my colleague’s behaviour and trivialised my concerns. I wasn’t aware of any other openly LGBTQ+ staff members that I could talk to for advice, or about what their experiences were of working in my new environment. These might seem like trivial remarks, but it made

me feel like I couldn't be myself at work. I didn't realise how often my partner came up in conversation until I was actively trying to cover it up. I couldn't talk about who I live with, or what I did at the weekend, or who I was spending my time with. It meant that I couldn't bond with my colleagues in the same way that everyone else could, and I probably came across as cold and aloof. I worried that if I opened up to people that they wouldn't respect me or might ridicule me behind my back. It made me question my relationship with colleagues in previous jobs – did others share poor opinions of LGBTQ+ people and they just didn't say it to my face because they already knew I was a lesbian?

One good thing did come from that job. A couple of months after I left, one of the other doctors found out that I was queer, and messaged me to say that they were also in a same-sex relationship. They also didn't feel like they could tell anyone from that workplace and wanted to talk to someone about coming out and what they were going through. It felt really nice that they were able to talk to me. It made me think that maybe by being courageous and being more open about my sexuality at work, it might provide others with an opportunity to do the same. I must admit this thought did fill me with anxiety. As a minority, queer people often feel an obligation to take on the burden of trying to make the workplace a safe place. Having to 'out' myself at work in order to try and create this, could feel unsafe and open me to discrimination.

Since then, I have moved to a new workplace. I would like to say that I have left these unpleasant experiences behind me, but I am definitely a lot more guarded than I once was. Should I come out at work? I suppose the answer that I have come to is 'yes' – but only if I feel it is safe to do so.

In my current rotation I have been open about my life with a few colleagues who seem to be open-minded and with whom I work on a very regular basis. Sometimes I take opportunities to gauge their opinions first. For example, there was a news story on the TV in the staff room last week about LGBTQ+ military veterans reclaiming the medals they had been stripped of, so I asked a colleague what they thought about this. With people who I don't know as well I tend to be purposefully vaguer if asked questions that might reveal that I am queer. For me it is a balance between the harm of potentially being subject to discrimination at work, but also the emotional harm caused by trying to hide who I am, and the harm caused to the LGBTQ+ staff population as a whole when there is a culture that erases us in the workplace.

This experience has taught me that representation matters – if my colleague and I were able to see other LGBTQ+ staff in our workplace being openly out, confident, and still able to go about

their daily jobs, we might have felt empowered to do so too. By taking small steps to be more honest about who I am, hopefully I can make a difference, and promote an environment where people feel safe to be who they are without judgement. To other queer doctors and medical students who feel similar anxieties about coming out at work, I would advise 'testing the waters' with colleagues first – gauging people's opinions about LGBTQ+ topics is a useful tool to decide if they are someone you want to open up to. This should, however, not solely be the burden of queer people alone. I would encourage non-LGBTQ+ people within the NHS to show their allyship. This could be by challenging hurtful statements, listening to colleagues who feel oppressed by their work environment, and validating their concerns, being kind if a colleague comes out to you, or simply wearing a pride lanyard or a name badge with your pronouns to identify yourself as someone safe to talk to. Finally, I would also encourage organisations to actively seek the opinions of LGBTQ+ staff on what it is like to work there, and what can be done to improve things – staff may not come forward on their own for fear of reprisal or that they will not be taken seriously.



The **British Student Doctor** is an open access journal, which means that all content is available without charge to the user or their institution. You are allowed to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of the articles in this journal without asking prior permission from either the publisher or the author.

bsdj.org.uk



[/thebsdj](https://www.facebook.com/thebsdj)



[@thebsdj](https://twitter.com/thebsdj)



[@thebsdj](https://www.instagram.com/thebsdj)

Journal DOI

[10.18573/issn.2514-3174](https://doi.org/10.18573/issn.2514-3174)

Issue DOI

[10.18573/bsdj.v5i2](https://doi.org/10.18573/bsdj.v5i2)



The **British Student Doctor** is published by **The Foundation for Medical Publishing**, a charitable incorporated organisation registered in England and Wales (Charity No. 1189006), and a subsidiary of **The Academy of Medical Educators**.

This journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. The copyright of all articles belongs to **The Foundation for Medical Publishing**, and a citation should be made when any article is quoted, used or referred to in another work.



Cardiff University Press
Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

The **British Student Doctor** is an imprint of Cardiff University Press, an innovative open-access publisher of academic research, where 'open-access' means free for both readers and writers.

cardiffuniversitypress.org