

Dear colleague,

I am writing to you about the disgraceful riots across the country, which are rooted in the Islamophobia and racism which sadly persist across society. The NMC stands with its professions and its partners in health and care in condemning the violence which has unfolded.

It is disturbing to hear that there are professionals on our register who have been injured in the riots and are very frightened. Everyone has the right to feel safe at work and it is completely unacceptable that more than a quarter of a million professionals on our register from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds should have to work in fear of racism or other forms of discrimination, abuse and violence.

We are clear that where this type of behaviour occurs in health and care, it is not just a safety issue for professionals but also for other people receiving care. We recognise that professionals may worry about their decisions and actions in these circumstances. This information is designed to help professionals on our register in their decision making.

Refusing care when subjected to any form or violence or aggression

We have been asked what professionals and students need to know when it comes to refusing care when faced with racism, violence or aggression by a member of the public.

The Code sets out the standards of behaviour and professionalism that apply across the nursing and midwifery professions. At its core is the principle that professionals should prioritise people and put the interests of people needing or using health and care services first. At the same time, the Code makes clear that professionals must take account of their own safety, the safety of others and the availability of other options for providing care.

Therefore, if you feel unsafe, unable or unwilling to provide care to an abusive patient, you should escalate your concerns as soon as possible. Your health and safety at work is your employer's responsibility. They will have processes in place to keep you safe and free from fear, including if you experience racism, abuse, violence or discrimination.

You should also document your professional decision making and the actions you took when withdrawing care from somebody for this reason.

Remember that the Code, together with your employer's policies, is your guide to using your professional judgement, making decisions and maintaining your professionalism in challenging times.

Tackling racism and disorder

There are more than 826,000 professionals on our register and it goes without saying that the vast majority will be appalled by the riots, which are impacting on health and care professionals and settings.

However, if you know of a colleague, or indeed anybody at all, who is in any way inciting or taking part in the riots or the racist rhetoric, then please consider reporting them to the police. And in the event that they are a professional on our register, please also raise your concern with us – the Code is clear on the standards of behaviour that the public can expect from every single nursing and midwifery professional. For example, it sets out the importance of treating people fairly and without discrimination, bullying or harassment, and of keeping to the law.

As you stand by and support each other, you may find it helpful to refer to the guidance that we supported NHS England and NHS Confederation to produce on combatting racial discrimination against ethnic minority nurses, midwives and nursing associates. As the guidance says:

‘Challenging racism requires sustained proactive action by our organisations, but each of us also has a duty and responsibility to proactively identify, challenge and oppose racism; and to look at ourselves and be willing to change any behaviours and unfounded beliefs that could damage our colleagues and people in our care. It is an expectation of the NMC Code, and a pre-requisite for effective practise.’

It is also worth revisiting our social media guidance, which sets out broad principles to enable them to act professionally, ensuring public protection at all times.

If an employer wants to seek advice on a potential referral, please call our advice line on 020 7462 8850 or employerlinkservice@nmc-uk.org.

Best wishes,

Sam Foster
Executive Nurse Director of Professional Practice