



CONDUCT COUNTS!

Communication and Conduct

SCENARIO

Julie is a great Respiratory Therapist. She has been practicing for over 15 years and loves what she does. She had earned the trust of her employer, so much so, that she was selected to be a preceptor to student Respiratory Therapists during their clinical year. Julie's employer was excited to have Julie represent the profession to new students entering the field.

When Julie first started as a preceptor, she was given all sorts of advice from her fellow Respiratory Therapists. One piece of advice that Julie heard and decided to follow-up was the advice that, "student RTs should really get a sense of how tough the frontline work of a Respiratory Therapist is". So with that in mind, Julie decided she was going to take a tough love approach to the students she would be assigned.

Julie's tough love included using very blunt language when communicating with the students. This included making disparaging remarks to the students when they made mistakes, poking fun of them if the students seemed overwhelmed in the moment, questioning (in public) their emotional and mental ability to be a Respiratory Therapist.

Julie also remembered that when she was a student, there was a bit of hazing that she was expected to endure. Julie thought this would also be a good idea, as it was sort of tradition! Julie instructed her students to give up their seat in the staff lounge and sit on the floor if a staff RT required the chair. Julie made her students clean the wheels on the ventilator with toothbrushes, so that the students could learn the meaning of hard work. The students were expected to have a coffee ready and waiting upon Julie's arrival in the morning.

Julie would giggle to herself and share funny stories of the student's reactions with other staff RTs. Hey, after all, we are all one big family, what's a little hazing here and there.



PROFESSIONALISM

"Professionalism" or professional conduct is a term often used to describe the behaviours that are expected of individuals who hold a certain role in society. A "professional" is typically someone who has obtained skills that are recognized as requiring specific, intensive training and who applies those skills in a position impacting others (e.g., engineer, lawyer, RT, PT, MD, etc.). Professionals are often held to moral, ethical and legal standards because of this potential impact.



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RESULTS

The CRTO received a complaint from several of Julie's students about unprofessional behavior towards them. The allegations included bullying and verbal abuse. As required under the RHPA, when the CRTO receives a complaint, it must investigate the allegations. An investigator was assigned and interviewed the students involved. The students reported being publically shamed by Julie to the point where they were afraid to come in for their next shift. Another student commented that he was now having second thoughts about becoming a Respiratory Therapist, as he had no idea that the culture could be so toxic. A third student was seeking counseling as she was going through very tough personal family matters and Julie's behavior towards her was exacerbating the situation.

At the conclusion of the investigation, a panel of the Inquires, Complaints and Reports Committee (the "Panel") reviewed the case and ordered Julie to appear before them for an Oral Caution and to take a Specified Continuing Educational or Remediation Program (SCERP) on professionalism in the workplace.

Julie was to bear the cost of the SCERP. The Panel concluded that based on the information they reviewed, it appeared that Julie did not meet the CRTO Standards of Practice, which state:

- Demonstrate professionalism and respect in all forms of communication
- Refrain from making false, deliberately misleading or offensive statements, contrary to the interests of the public or the honour and dignity of the profession, whether orally or in writing.
- Recognize how a power imbalance can impact therapeutic and professional relationships, and demonstrate integrity in all interactions, including abstaining from entering into personal relationships where professional boundaries could be compromised.
- Must not make comments, enter into situations, and/or demonstrate behavior that could be interpreted as abusive, harassing, discriminatory, disrespectful or of a sexual nature, and must take action to prevent similar behavior in others by reporting to the appropriate authority.

In their caution, the Panel noted to Julie that not only did she act unprofessional towards the students, but by doing so in front of patients, she undermined the respect and trust a patient puts in a Respiratory Therapist.

BOTTOM LINE

The times, they are a changin. What a RT may have experienced in the past does not validate how they should act in the present day or in the future. Societal expectation of what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the workplace has vastly changed over the last decade. It's important to understand that although you may view a certain type of communication as harmless fun, it can be seen by others as abusive behavior. It's important to always remain professional in the workplace. A Respiratory Therapist's obligations are not only the clinical side of practice, but also how they interact with patients, staff and students. Further, people around us are faced with many personal challenges that, as a colleague, you may not be aware of. What you may view is a small insult could have a devastating consequence on someone else. It's always best to follow the Standards of Practice and communicate professionally and respectfully with others in the workplace.

RESOURCES

[CRTO Standards of Practice](#)

