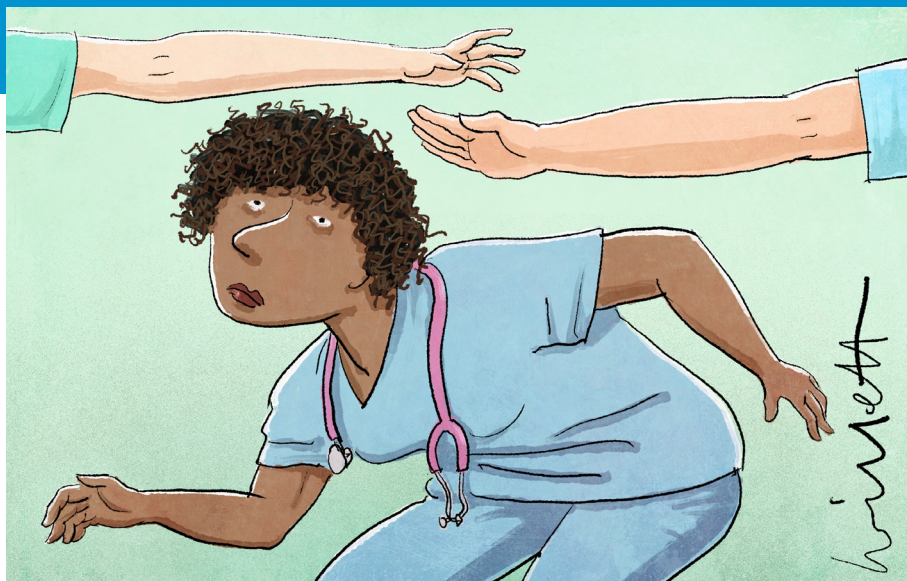


Can I touch my black colleague's hair?

While it might seem like harmless curiosity, it's intrusive and unprofessional, **Abi Rimmer** hears



Black colleagues are not exhibits
Rachael Harlow, clinical research fellow in pharmaceutical medicine

"The short answer is no—but let's explore why it's inappropriate to touch a colleague's hair.

"Curiosity about different hair textures isn't often malicious—but remember this is a professional setting. Hair is part of a person's body, and touching a colleague's body at work is not appropriate. Conversations about hair at work are rarely welcomed. Be respectful and avoid sensitive topics unless you can navigate them with respect.

"Black colleagues are not exhibits or pets. Even a polite request to touch someone's hair—not that I think there is such a thing, but for argument's sake let's entertain the idea—can feel dehumanising. Black professionals in the NHS already face extra challenges, including higher rates of disciplinary action, harassment, and lower annual review of competency progression scores, and adding to that list diminishes their personhood and dignity. This is a professional, and a human being.

"Your behaviour influences workplace culture. Treating black colleagues with respect sets a positive precedent. Inappropriate behaviour, especially in public, can humiliate and dehumanise. If you witness such behaviour you must speak up.

"When I've had my hair touched at work, often in view of patients, the public, and other colleagues, I'm sorry to say that I've put my own bodily autonomy far behind my desire not to create a scene. By standing up for a colleague, you set the standard that this act is not okay to anyone that might have seen it happen.

"Do your research, respect bodily autonomy, and speak up when you see harassment happening in your team."



Supportive colleagues make a huge difference
Omolara Akinlawon, year 2 foundation trainee

"Being a doctor is hard. It can be more difficult if you are part of a minority group—and even more isolating if you're subjected to subtle racialised interactions that further set you apart from your peers. Microaggressions can often go unnoticed by colleagues who may not have the same experiences.

"As a black woman serving a population that is predominately white British, I've experienced my fair share of microaggressions in the workplace, from patients questioning whether I'm really the doctor to comments about the quality of my English

"Microaggressions are difficult to identify and tackle because they are easy to ignore. As a busy doctor with a number of things on your mind, comments on the quality of your English, for example, can take you off guard and it can be difficult to formulate a sensible and adequate response in the moment.

"Having supportive colleagues can make a world of difference. A bystander can take action by calling out negative behaviour in a subtle way or drawing attention away from a likely embarrassed colleague.

"It may be difficult to respond in the moment and not everyone has a list of phrases to draw from, but the best support I've received from colleagues is from those who have acknowledged the incident and checked in with me afterwards.

"Being an active bystander requires action. That includes listening as well as speaking up. Our response challenges a culture of dismissal and silence and fosters a culture of zero tolerance for prejudice and discrimination."



It's an invasion of personal space
Ivy Drake, core surgical trainee

"While asking to touch a black person's hair may seem harmless or even well intentioned, it often causes them internal tension, especially in the workplace.

"As doctors, we want to have positive professional relationships, which adds another layer of complexity—you don't want to be that person who doesn't get on with colleagues. So you're left weighing it up—do I let this person touch my hair and allow myself to be objectified? Or do I say no and run the risk of that decision backfiring?

"If someone asked to touch my hair, my gut reaction would be no. I do try, however, to use these moments to educate rather than shutting the interaction down. You wouldn't ask a white person, so why me? Being different does not justify being singled out or treated differently. Treating black hair as exotic or strange perpetuates harmful stereotypes and reinforces the idea that black people are outsiders.

"Moreover, when black people face harsher penalisation if they stand up for themselves compared with their white counterparts, there is a pressure to say yes. As we strive for greater cultural awareness and empathy, let's remember that respecting personal boundaries includes respecting black hair.

"Let's educate ourselves and promote a world where everyone's agency over their bodies is honoured. By doing so, we contribute to a more inclusive and respectful society. Ultimately, when all doctors are respected it leads to improved patient outcomes and reduced health inequalities for those patients who are also marginalised."

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