

Scars from cutting – what to say or do in the clinical environment

Every year SPS speak with a handful of students who are anxious about the “bare below the elbows” policy in the clinical environment because they have scars from cutting, and are wondering how they might respond if others notice. We believe that medics (both students and doctors) are human beings first and foremost, and we bring our past with us, both the challenges we have faced and the strengths those challenges have given us. Patients do not want to be treated by robots but by human beings who understand how hard life can be at times. As a colleague said to me “We all come with scars in life, they are just not always visible.”

We wanted to break a few of the taboos and talk about this issue, so we asked our students and colleagues to tell us their experiences. Perhaps reading this will help others know how to respond if they notice scars on a colleague’s forearms.

“Before I read this notification I wasn't aware that there were other students who have had this issue. I applied to medicine... {late}... as I never thought I could become comfortable with the 'bare below the elbow' requirement.

The only thing I can really say on it is that I have worked in healthcare settings before and most people simply haven't cared that I have had scars (or even noticed). I understand that others' may be more visible though. The thing I am most insecure about is the idea of peers finding out; I have only just met these people and making friends can be difficult enough; it's annoying that it isn't up to me whether or when they find out these aspects of my past as exposing my scars is inevitable in clinical settings.”

“Firstly I just wanted to say thank you for posting this on the medicine portal - it really made me feel less alone in my experience of dealing with scars and comments from others regarding them when bare below the elbow.

... working as a HCA in the NHS I have experienced a few comments about my arms. I don't necessarily have anything particularly elaborate or wise to say to people who are worried about the issue, but I have only received comments a handful of times (they're usually from nurses or other healthcare assistants I work closely alongside in theatre). I've never had a comment from a patient or from a consultant/doctor, and the comments have never been offensive. I hope that is a reassuring fact.

I have found the best way to deal with these interactions (especially when they've happened in front of other people which is really difficult!) is just say “yes, they are old self-harm scars, but it's not something I do anymore, and I am much better now thanks.” I then like to steer the conversation to a new topic, or if that's not possible I 'remember' I have another task to do to create physical space away from the conversation! No-one has ever been intentionally rude or reacted particularly negatively to them, but obviously the way some people can speak about it does come off as rude. It's helpful just to remind myself that they don't mean to be rude or to make me uncomfortable!

Obviously I would like to be able to educate people on the subject, but I don't think these one-on-one interactions are a great place to try and address why it's not helpful to point out scars (or other similar things about people's appearance generally).”

"I had my scars covered by a tattoo last year..." (consultant colleague)

So – firstly thanks to all those who have been so honest about their experiences.

Secondly – if you do have scars, remember that you are not alone. Your history is part of what has brought you into medicine – to help others. Most people will not notice or comment on your scars. If they do, perhaps you want to have an answer prepared. You could choose from:

"I was attacked by a tiger in my gap year"

"I walked into a glass door"

Or maybe "Yep I used to self-harm but I don't any more. How about you?"

And if you do notice scars on a friend, classmate or colleague's arms, perhaps all you need to say is "If you ever want to talk, just let me know." Equally if the scars are clearly old and the time is not right, just carry on talking about the procedure you are doing. Few of us wish to be defined by any one part of our journey.

Support Resources

If you are struggling with your mental wellbeing, never be afraid to ask for support. The clinical skills tutors have helped many students in the past and are always willing to advise you how to cope with scars or with dealing with emotionally challenging consultations.

The [University Counselling Service](#) is excellent and offers one to ones as well as online resources and workshops for all sorts of mental health issues.

Student Pastoral Support are available to help you find the right support

med.sps@manchester.ac.uk

SRFT.SPS@manchester.ac.uk

MFTOR.sps@manchester.ac.uk

MFTWythenshawe.sps@manchester.ac.uk

LHTR.sps@lhtr.nhs.uk

Harmless: <https://harmless.org.uk/>

Mind: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/self-harm/about-self-harm/>

NHS Information: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/behaviours/self-harm/getting-help/>

Rethink: <https://www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/about-mental-illness/learn-more-about-symptoms/self-harm/>

Samaritans: <https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/if-youre-having-difficult-time/if-you-want-self-harm/>