

# Helping Program Directors Effectively Manage Rumors and Gossip

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**G**ossip or rumors are defined as informal or casual transmission of evaluative information, verified or unverified, about a person who is absent during the conversation.<sup>1</sup> Gossip and rumors are common in many social organizations. Their impact can be both positive and negative. From an evolutionary perspective, gossip can be used to advance self-serving interests and develop closeness at the expense of alienating outsiders.<sup>2</sup> In a workplace setting, gossip is quite common, with 1 online poll showing 90% of US workers participate in the behavior.<sup>3</sup> Similar numbers are estimated in other countries.<sup>4</sup> Rumors can waste time, reduce productivity, and lower morale. One study has shown that employees are more likely to transmit rumors, regardless of whether they believe them as true, when the motivation is to seek revenge on the organization for unfavorable treatment.<sup>5</sup> Another survey showed that although 96% of employees at a US office setting admitted to participating in gossip, there was an even mix of positive and negative gossip in 72% of the conversations, predominantly positive gossip in 21%, and predominantly negative gossip in only 7%.<sup>6</sup>

In graduate medical education (GME), residents and program directors (PDs) have a unique workplace relationship. Residents are atypical in being both students and employees simultaneously. Working together for long hours during residency training builds camaraderie, but may also serve as a breeding ground for gossip.<sup>7</sup> PDs assigned to supervise residents usually act as teachers. Anecdotally, they often have limited formal education or training in how to manage employees, although exact numbers are unknown. The Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education requires PDs to have “expertise” in their clinical specialty and “experience” in administration.<sup>8</sup> Given this background, when a PD is exposed to a rumor that affects the training program, he or she may not be equipped to manage it.

This article presents 3 hypothetical rumor scenarios encountered in training programs, provides a brief human resources (HR) perspective about the relevant sensitivities and dilemmas to be considered, and introduces a basic framework PDs can use when

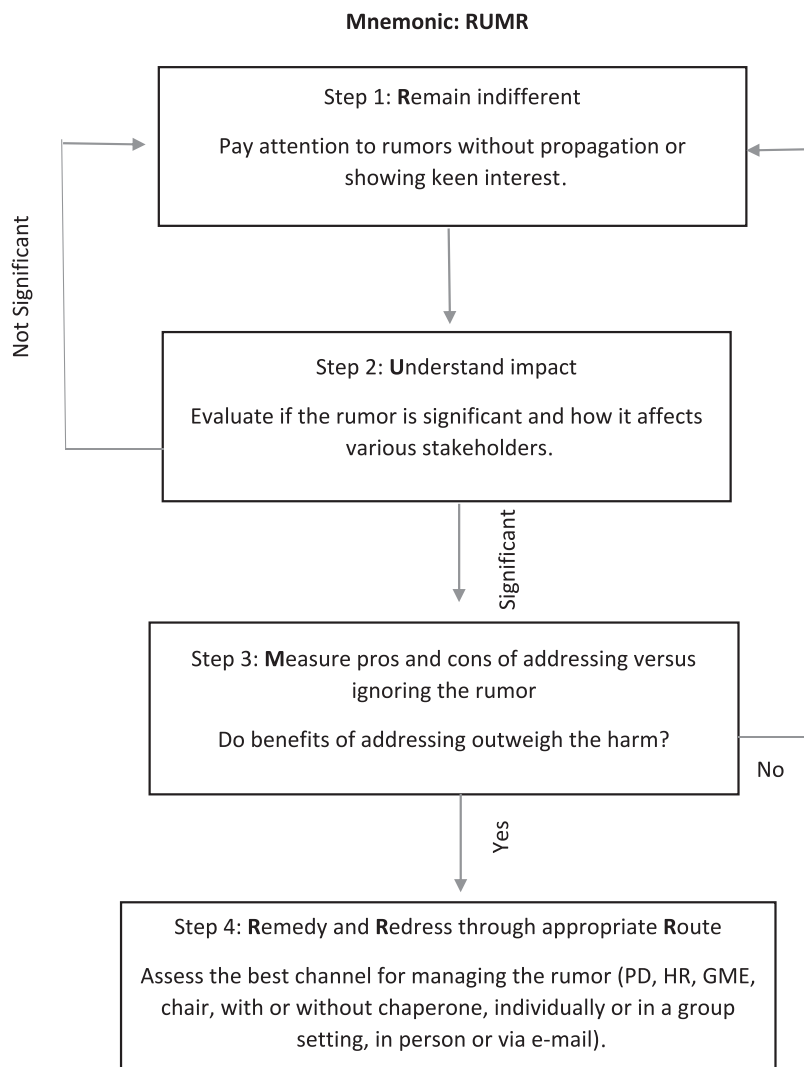
confronted with rumors. This framework includes 4 steps that comprise the mnemonic “RUMR” (FIGURE).

1. *Remain indifferent.* Avoid showing keen interest in the rumor, which can help discourage the rumor from spreading.
2. *Understand the impact* of the rumor on various stakeholders, including but not limited to the residents, rotating students, faculty, administration, leadership, and patients.
3. *Measure the pros and cons of addressing or ignoring the rumor.*
4. *Remedy and redress through appropriate route.* If the rumor needs to be addressed, consider whether it is appropriate for the PD to take the lead with or without a supervisor, seek the council of the institution’s GME resources or HR department as needed, and determine which communication channels to use.

## Personal Relationships at Work

Workplace romantic relationships are common, with some surveys showing a prevalence of roughly 40% to 50%.<sup>9,10</sup> When faced with the rumor of a romantic relationship involving 2 single residents, the PD should not ignore it, but avoid soliciting details about the rumor from third parties (step 1, remain indifferent) and focus on the residents’ work performance. If the romantic relationship does not affect their work performance, it is likely not significant enough to be addressed. The situation becomes murky if the rumor involves 1 or both residents who are in committed relationships with other people having an affair. In this case, the impact of the rumor may be gauged by work performance or by the potential impact on the residents’ emotional and social well-being (step 2, understand the impact). The next step is to assess whether the cost of addressing the rumor outweighs the cost of ignoring it (step 3, measure the pros and cons of taking action). In this case, letting the rumor continue could possibly result in harm to the residents’ reputations, and, when they eventually find out, instill in them a sense of betrayal that their colleagues did not tell them earlier. On the

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**FIGURE**  
Four Steps to Managing Rumors

other hand, acknowledging or addressing the rumor has the chance of giving it credence, thereby risking its spread. However, informing the victims of the rumors also empowers them to have a say in how the situation is managed. The fourth step (remedy and redress the rumor through appropriate route) is considering how to talk to the residents. In this case, it would be appropriate for the PD to talk to the residents and staff as a group to set expectations that rumors are discouraged in the program's culture. Regarding the residents involved in the rumor, a potential benefit of including a third party such as an HR representative or a GME representative is that the residents may feel more comfortable with someone who does not evaluate their job performance.

If the PD hears a rumor about a resident being involved in a romantic relationship with a supervising faculty member, the relevance of the second step

(understanding the impact of the rumor) is clear, as the power differential between the resident and the faculty member can lead to learner mistreatment and sexual harassment, which can create liability for the program and institution. The ramifications of this are significant and complicated; multiple parties, including the department's chair, the institution's HR department, and the GME office, may have to be involved. The PD must ensure that those in a romantic relationship do not supervise or evaluate each other, which may require changing the rotation schedule and the call schedule. The PD may also ask the involved parties to enter into a nepotism agreement, so that one does not determine the other's assignment, grade, salary, or promotion. This helps to avoid favoritism and ensure that an individual's evaluation is based on work performance rather than personal feelings.<sup>11,12</sup>

## Personnel Turnover

Personnel turnover is an unavoidable part of any workplace, including residency programs. Here we apply the 4-step framework (RUMR) to a PD who hears a rumor that residents are worried a faculty member may leave their department. As the first step (remain indifferent), the PD does not engage in the rumor exchange. As the second step (understand impact), the PD realizes that the rumor is significant enough to cause the residents to worry. As the third step (measure pros and cons of addressing or ignoring the rumor), the PD takes into account the anticipatory stress experienced by the residents and the credibility and trust of the program leadership. As the fourth step (remedy and redress through appropriate route), it is more appropriate for the PD to handle this rumor rather than including a third party because it involves the training program. The PD can reign in the rumor by addressing the residents and faculty together, either in a group setting or by an e-mail announcement, providing them with accurate information, thereby reducing the room for speculation and encouraging the residents to come to the PD with any questions or concerns.

## Preferential Treatment

A third type of rumor that can evoke strong feelings among residents is unfair or preferential treatment of certain residents, placing the rest at a (real or perceived) disadvantage. These rumors may involve a resident getting more vacation time than others or a resident being favored to attend a professional meeting that other residents were restricted from attending. As the first step, the PD notices the rumor and does not engage in it (remain indifferent). As the second step, the PD evaluates the significance of this rumor (understand the impact). Because employees' work satisfaction and motivation have been shown to be contingent on one's beliefs about parity and emotional reactions to discrimination against one's group,<sup>13</sup> the PD decides that this rumor needs to be addressed (measure pros and cons of addressing). Because this rumor involves residents and the PD's decisions about residents, the PD meets with the residents in person to explain the policies and criteria used to decide which residents get to attend conferences or take leave (remedy and redress through appropriate route). If the concern has merit, the PD makes every effort to correct the preferential treatment. The PD can also increase transparency by making a leave log or conference log available in a shared portal that all residents can view. The more accurate information the PD can provide, the less room for residents to fill in the gaps with their own explanations.<sup>14</sup> In this case, as there is a possibility

that residents may feel afraid of retaliation for accusing the PD of favoritism, it would be helpful to have a third party, either another trusted faculty member or a representative from the institution's GME office, who can collect questions and concerns and share them anonymously with the PD.

## Conclusions

Program directors and other GME leaders should take steps to prevent rumors by proactively disseminating accurate information whenever appropriate and controlling rumors by paying attention without propagating them, evaluating whether a rumor is significant enough to be addressed, and if it is, determining which channels are appropriate to address it. This framework will help PDs effectively manage rumors and create a culture of professionalism, which is a shared responsibility for everyone involved in the clinical and learning environment.

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