



Resolving issues in the workplace

Catherine O'Connor gives a rundown of the Irish health service grievance procedure

IN a recent issue of the *WIN*, I went through how the Dignity at Work Policy can be used to reference bullying in the workplace. Internship students and new graduates sometimes have other issues in the workplace that they do not feel confident addressing by themselves. As employees, it is important that you are aware of the process of resolving a workplace issue, as well as how your union can support you in doing so.

What is the grievance procedure?

There is a national policy for dealing with grievances, which is outlined in the Grievance and Disciplinary Procedures for the Health Service (2004)¹ and applies to employees working in the public health service. The policy came about following discussions between the Health Service Employers Agency (HSEA) and health service trade unions, and it is in accordance with the Labour Relations Commission's Code of Practice on Grievance and Disciplinary Procedures. It is worth reading so that you have a greater understanding of the steps involved in resolving a grievance.

What is a grievance?

A grievance is defined in the procedure as "a complaint which an employee(s) has concerning his or her terms and conditions of employment, working environment or working relationships".¹ A grievance can be individual or collective, ie. complaints raised by or on behalf of a group of employees. The procedure covers a range of issues, including rostering arrangements and granting of overtime, health and safety issues, the interpretation of national/local agreements (including matters relating to pay-related benefits), and relationships with work colleagues.

Depending on the nature of your grievance, you may feel that you need extra support. Please remember that INMO members have access to a 24-hour counselling helpline service. Public sector

employees also have access to the employee assistance and counselling service.

Resolving a grievance

There are four formal stages to the grievance procedure. However, as many routine complaints can be resolved on an informal basis, the grievance procedure requires that nurses and midwives raise the matter informally with their immediate line manager before invoking the formal grievance procedure. If the complaint relates to the line manager, the nurse/midwife may discuss the matter informally with another manager.

New graduates can be held back by a fear of repercussions, but it is important to note that one of the underpinning principles of the grievance procedure is that a nurse/midwife cannot be penalised for making a complaint in good faith, regardless of whether the complaint is upheld. If you are unsure of your rights and entitlements and would like more information, please get in touch with the INMO Information Office (contact details are available at: www.inmo.ie/Pay_Rights).

If the matter has not been resolved satisfactorily through informal discussions, the nurse/midwife may then raise a formal complaint under the grievance procedure. As a nurse/midwife, you have the right to be accompanied by a union representative at all formal meetings under the grievance procedure and I would strongly advise any member with a grievance to discuss it with the union official for their area before formally invoking the grievance procedure. Your union official is there to support and guide you through the process; they will explain what your options are and what is likely to happen. If you don't know who the INMO official for your area is, please visit: www.inmo.ie/Industrial_Relations

The first stage of the procedure is to raise the issue with your line manager. A meeting will then be held within seven working days. The outcome of that meeting should be

given in writing to the nurse/midwife within seven working days. If an agreement cannot be reached, the second stage involves the matter being referred to a more senior manager. Again the nurse/midwife should receive the decision in writing within a further seven working days of the meeting.

If there is still no resolution, the issue is progressed to stage three – referral to the human resources (HR) department. If the issue remains unresolved at that stage, then under stage four of the procedure the issue may be referred to an appropriate third party, such as the Labour Relations Commission, the Labour Court or officers of the Workplace Relations Commissioner.

Keep good records

As with other types of workplace issues such as bullying, it is within your interest to keep a written record for yourself. Make a note of the time and date when you first spoke with your line manager about your grievance. If it is not possible to resolve the issue informally and you need to invoke stage one of the grievance procedure, you should write to your manager to make a formal complaint and to notify them that you are invoking the grievance procedure.

Remember to utilise your union if you experience difficulties in the workplace. The issue is yours, but your INMO union official is there to provide you with advice, to support you through the process, and to represent you if required. As you begin your career, it is important that you address issues in the workplace as soon as possible. If an issue is addressed early on, there is a greater chance of a quick and satisfactory resolution, which will help you to feel happier and more confident in the workplace.

Catherine O'Connor is the INMO's student and new graduate officer. If you have a query you can send an email to: catherine.oconnor@inmo.ie

Reference

1. Health Service Employers Agency 2004. *Grievance and Disciplinary Procedures for the Health Service*. Pages 2-6. Available at <https://www.hse.ie/eng/staff/resources/hrppg/grievance-and-disciplinary-procedure-2004.pdf>