**Anonymous Letters in Higher Education Institutes; the need of a policy**

Lekamwasam Sarath, Department of Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka

**Abstract**

Anonymous letters have a long history and are frequently encountered in higher education institutes. Despite the common occurrence, many countries and institutions do not have proper policy or guidelines on handling anonymous communications. This brief report highlights the importance of having either national or institutional policies or guidelines on anonymous communications, based on his experience as a dean of a medical faculty in Sri Lanka for three year period.

**Comment**

According to the Oxford dictionary anonymous letter refers to a letter which is **unsigned**, unattributed, unattested or uncredited (1). Although broadly called letters, anonymous communications can be of many forms such as phone calls, messages, emails etc. The content too can vary from malicious and defamation remarks to allegations, threats, and requests or may even be used to express grievances. When the content is defamatory and hateful causing anguish and despair in the receiver the expression “Poison-pen letter” or “hate-mail” is often used(2).

Anonymous communications have a long history and in 1972 an anonymous informant nicknamed “Deep Throat” informed two reporters of the Washington Post, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, about the involvement of U.S President Richard Nixon’s administration in the infamous “Watergate” scandal(3). Anonymous informant can be a “whistleblower”. The majority of anonymous writers, however, do not fall into this category.

Anonymous letters are not uncommon in higher education field. The author encountered 15 anonymous letters during the three year period as a Dean of a Medical Faculty in Sri Lanka. Of these, eight were from unidentified student groups, six from “concerned groups of academics” and one was from non-academics. All letters were unsigned and had no trace of the real source of origin. Paola *et al* in 1998 surveying 119 deans of Association of American Medical Collages (AAMC) found that 67 of them have received at least one anonymous letter during their tenure. Sixteen of them have discarded those without any action while others have sequestered, investigated or filed them. Only one dean reported having institutional policy on how to deal with such communications and acted accordingly(4). This illustrates the lack of uniformity in dealing with such situations and the dilemma faced by many who receive anonymous information while discharging official duties.

Guidelines or policies related to handling anonymous letters exist in some countries. Hong Kong has published national guidelines on how to deal with “difficult complainants” in the Guide to Complaint Handling and Public Enquiries (5). The Central Vigilance Commission in India in the Circular No 07/11/2014 has stated that no action should be taken on anonymous letters. The same circular, however, allows inquiry into anonymous letters when facts are verifiable (6). However, the prior approval of the board is required for such inquiry. The Hywel Dha University Health Board in Wales has taken a different view about anonymous communications and set up pathways for such communications to come in and also to deal with them (7).

Of the 15 communications the author received, six were from academics. It is hard to believe that academics too choose the convenience of anonymity in expressing their concerns given that academics are expected to express freely and openly and be the role models for students. When inquired individually, 15 of 20 academics in a higher education institute in Sri Lanka thought that anonymous letter is an acceptable way of communication and were happy to select this method of communication if the situation demanded. It is possible that anonymous communications are commoner in certain countries or regions but scarcity of data limits such comparison.

In the absence of guidelines, many administrators I inquired agreed that action is required based on the content, on case-by-case basis. They were willing to act when the content included a threat to life or financial or exam irregularity. This appears a reasonable approach especially when no institutional policy exists. The Canadian Society of Forensic Science Journal in 1982 discussed the ways that can be used to identify the typist who involved in typing anonymous letters (8). Furthermore, the book titled “International Handbook of Threat Assessment” edited by Reid Meloy and Jens Hoffmann has a separate chapter on the Assessment of threatening communications(9).

With the advancement of IT, email is increasingly used in modern days for rapid and easy communication. Iqbal *et al* in 2010 proposed a method for mining the writing styles of anonymous authors. In a collection of e-mails generated by multiple anonymous authors, the authors have attempted to first cluster the anonymous e-mails by the stylometric features and then extract the unique writing style called “writeprint” from each cluster(10). More studies are needed in this area especially for judicial purposes as anonymous authors will prefer emails over the other methods for communication due to easiness and availability.

In summary, this brief report highlights the lack of consistency in handling anonymous communications and the necessarily of guidelines. Although it sounds logical to have national guideline, it may not suit all sections and it is more appropriate to have institutional guidelines. Issues in higher education institutes are multitude and diverse, hence, a guideline dedicated to high education sector should be developed.

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