

Sacrifices in the face of the pandemic: Fit testing and facial hair for Muslim healthcare professionals

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Abstract

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare workers were asked to clean-shave their facial hair in order to comply with PPE regulations. This proposed a challenge for Muslim male healthcare workers sporting facial hair as it is intimately associated with male-Muslim identity (1). All four Sunni jurisprudence schools consider the maintenance of a beard an obligatory requirement for males (2); although it is commonly accepted under Islamic law that exceptions can be made in times of necessity (3).

This study involved the cross-sectional survey of healthcare workers in 19 different UK trusts. The survey comprised 11 questions. The survey was disseminated through online platforms to healthcare workers. There were a total of 34 responses collected between 18/10/2020-04/11/2020.

From the 34 survey responses, 35% of respondents clean shaved in order to pass their fit test. 32% felt forced to shave by their trust. Only 25% of respondents felt that their trust had alternatives such as hoods. Of those respondents who clean shaved (n=12), 50% felt forced to shave by their trust; 41.6% felt their Muslim identity was negatively affected; 50% felt their concerns were disregarded during the pandemic; 50% did not feel they could raise their religious concerns with their trust. Of those respondents who did not clean shave (n=22), 45% missed out on learning opportunities; 40.9% felt their working environment was made hostile by their decision.

This study concludes that a significant proportion of Muslim healthcare workers who complied with fit-testing requirements felt they were compelled to do so and likely did not receive appropriate consultation and communication from their respective employing trusts. Too few trusts offered alternatives such as hoods. Greater organisational awareness is required to highlight the importance of beards for Muslim men, so trusts can offer more effective support.

This study was limited by small sample size and narrow sampling demographics (i.e. lack of non-medical healthcare workers responded to the survey). A repeat survey at a later date will provide further insights into the evolving experiences of bearded Muslim healthcare workers during the ongoing pandemic.

References

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