

Less secrecy could help astronomy stop the bullying and harassment within its ranks

November 22 2016, by Michael J. I. Brown



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Shocking allegations of bullying, harassment and sexual assault at CSIRO's Astronomy and Space Sciences (CASS) division were revealed on Sunday by the ABC's [Background Briefing program](#).

In CASS alone, the Radio National broadcast said there have been [16](#)

[investigations into professional misconduct](#) since 2008, including a [sexual assault](#) allegation that was referred to police.

Many Australian astronomers, myself included, have been reeling between grief and anger since hearing the broadcast. The Astronomical Society of Australia Council (of which I am a member), [has condemned what has taken place at CASS](#) and called for safe workplaces for scientists.

The lives and careers of many superb astronomers have been damaged by what happened at CASS. And yet much of this has been hidden from view, including from friends and colleagues.

The Astronomical Society of Australia (ASA) Council is concerned by the findings of misconduct at CSIRO's Astronomy and Space Sciences (CASS) Division, including bullying, sexual harassment and an allegation of sexual assault.

First and foremost, we offer our sympathies and support to staff and students who have been the victims of this behaviour. The negative impact on their lives has been far reaching. We take this opportunity to reaffirm our Society's strong commitment to ensuring safe workplaces and ethical behaviour for our members.

Australia is a world leader in radio astronomy – both in instrument development, and scientifically. CASS is a hub of Australian radio astronomy: astronomers and their students regularly visit CASS, to use the national facilities and work with staff. Prior to the revelations on Background Briefing, the astronomical community could not have been aware of instances of bullying, harassment and sexual assault – and it is a wider practice in academia to keep such instances confidential. As such, astronomers are unable to judge potential risks to themselves and their students when visiting CASS, or similar facilities.

The misconduct at CSIRO is part of a broader problem that has been identified within the science community, within Australia and internationally. The ASA has implemented initiatives of the ASA's Inclusion, Diversity and Equity in Astronomy (IDEA) Chapter including a code of conduct for behaviour at ASA events, and all ASA members must also abide by the ASA's Code of Ethics. However, it is vital that individual institutions ensure a safe and supportive workplace for all their staff, students and visitors.

This incident serves as a wake-up call to all Australian scientific departments and institutes to critically assess their workplace conditions. We also recommend that departments take time to reflect after reports of professional misconduct to ensure that the actions followed lead to the safest outcomes for victims.

The ASA's statement following the Background Briefing report. Credit: Astronomical Society of Australia

Damage and consequences

With the benefit of hindsight, one can see something was amiss at CASS. Several prominent female astronomers have left CASS during the past five years, including astronomers with coveted tenured positions.

Several were [interviewed by Background Briefing](#), and their pain was evident.

What has happened to the perpetrators of bullying and harassment? That is less clear.

In one instance the perpetrator was counselled and had an "adverse finding" placed on their file, but until Sunday's program even this limited information had not been disclosed. The person remains on staff at CASS.

When Background Briefing's Hagar Cohen asked CSIRO executive director [David Williams](#) about the consequences of this case, he responded:

"I'm not prepared or not allowed to talk about those issues [...] They're confidential staff issues, and that's the way it remains, and that's the way all organisations work in these areas."

This lack of clarity is all too common when it comes to bullying and harassment in academia. Indeed, a legitimate concern is perpetrators face no real consequences at all.

Former UC Berkeley astronomer Geoff Marcy has been accused of [sexual harassment stretching back decades](#). In 2015, UC Berkeley found he violated campus sexual harassment policies, and [in a statement the university said](#) his initial punishment was "zero tolerance policy

regarding future behaviour and by stripping him of the procedural protections that all other faculty members enjoy". In other words, don't do it again.

It was only after public outcry, [including from colleagues](#), that Marcy [stepped down from his position](#).

While no longer welcome at UC Berkeley, Marcy's retirement entitles him to be an emeritus professor, a (usually) prestigious title.

Who's at risk?

How does one protect oneself, junior staff and students from harassment and bullying?

Many institutions have policies or management that refuse to disclose the occurrence of misconduct, let alone reveal who perpetrators are.

There are real risks to individuals and institutions who break with the secrecy surrounding harassment.

Astronomer Tim Slater, who was found to have [harassed students and staff](#), is currently [suing the University of Arizona for defamation](#) because [documents relevant to his case were leaked](#).

In the UK, [astronomer Carole Mundell was unsuccessfully sued](#) when she revealed a colleague was the alleged perpetrator of sexual harassment at Liverpool John Moores University.

A consequence of all this is the development of "whisper networks," where names of harassers are passed between trusted individuals. Scientists keep lists of names (often memorised), steering junior staff and students away from danger.

This was something raised by Cohen when she interviewed Australian astronomer Bryan Gaensler for the Background Briefing report.

Hagar Cohen: How many people are on your black list?

Bryan Gaensler: I personally know of about 20 senior tenured male astronomers who've had some accusations against them. Whether the accusations are substantiated or not, I can't say, because I haven't participated in the investigations, but I know of about 20 people.

By definition, such "whisper networks" are [patchy at best](#).

Prior to Background Briefing's revelations, many Australian astronomers were completely unaware that a CASS staff member had been accused of sexual assault, which was referred to police.

Many (perhaps most) Australian astronomers remain unaware of his identity, and may be sending junior staff and students to work with him at CASS.

Removing the absolute secrecy surrounding harassment cases could provide pressure for change.

Yale University provides [anonymised summaries of harassment cases](#), including consequences for perpetrators. It provides the Yale community with a measure of the extent of the harassment and the consequences for it, while protecting the identity of victims.

Unfortunately few (if any) Australian universities and institutes [have adopted such an open approach](#).

Why now?

International astronomy has been rocked by these harassment scandals, including the cases at [UC Berkeley](#), [Caltech](#), the [University of Arizona](#), [Liverpool John Moores University](#) and now [CSIRO](#).

What is going on? Is astronomy particularly prone to [sexual harassment](#) and bullying? I hope not.

But the reliance of students and junior staff on the benevolence of senior scientists and academics may suppress reporting of harassment.

Senior scientists provide expert knowledge, access to facilities, introductions to potential collaborators and (critically) write reference letters for job applications. This concentration of power [may lead to abuses](#) going unreported.

I sincerely hope these recent scandals reflect a new intolerance for workplace bullying and [harassment](#). Victims, their colleagues and professional organisations are less willing to accept misconduct and the destruction it causes.

Astronomers, familiar with collaboration and outreach, are working together to put public pressure on institutions that fail to provide safe workplaces their colleagues and students.

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