

Doctor Under Stress

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It is incontrovertible that the medical profession is a challenging but stressful occupation. It has been observed that doctors are prone to anxiety and depression, and to abuse alcohol⁽¹⁾. The quotidian stressors include the intrinsic nature of the job, work relationships and demands of career development. For junior doctors, the rites of passage in hospitals include long working hours. They are on a very exacting learning curve and are required to establish effective working relationships with patients, families and colleagues⁽²⁾. Fatigue impairs performance, learning and quality of life. These are the conditions most doctors encounter at the threshold of their career. Permitting doctors to work while so fatigued could be a breach of duty to their patients – working them harder would mean working dangerously⁽³⁾.

Most senior doctors are expected to assume a number of roles – being a clinician, teacher, researcher and even administrator. Role ambiguity, conflict and overload may cause the emanation of stress symptoms. Frustration, absenteeism and low morale are ominous signs of inveterate stress.

Of the 42 doctors referred to the Department of Psychological Medicine, National University Hospital, in the last 10 years, there were more men (35) than women (7) – ratio 5:1. The highest referrals were young doctors (mean age 25.2 years) – 32 house officers and medical officers with acute depression associated with work overload. The second group of 7 doctors (mean age 45.5 years) had mid-life crises of family or marital conflicts. The third group was 3 retired doctors (mean age 67 years) who were referred for insomnia associated with physical ill health.

Most doctors with psychological problems do not seek help and tend to self-medicate; sometimes they abuse benzodiazepines or alcohol. Three doctors referred had alcohol dependence syndrome but denied they had any drinking problems at all. Denial and rationalisation are powerful mental defence mechanisms which often delay appropriate intervention.

Reaction to stress will obviously depend on personality factors, skills and social support. Supervision and support are needed especially for the junior doctors who are often thrown into the deep end. Relative allocation of time to work, teaching, research, family and wider interests will vary with circumstances.

Factors associated with job satisfaction include recognition of quantity and quality of work done, responsibility in work development and planning, personal advancement and of course, salary. Policy must be understood and there should be adequate supervision to ensure that skills match the demands of the job. The article on stress management by Dr Ken Ung is required reading⁽⁴⁾.

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