

Research Paper

Influential Factors on the Mental Well-Being of newly Qualified Medical Professional

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative research serves as a fundamental way of analysis in the field of mental health and well-being as it offers a well-rounded understanding of the concept or research question. It is an inclusive method that involves varied perspectives through unique data collection methods like questionnaires, interviews, etc. This paper provides a detailed analysis of the factors influencing the psychological health of newly qualified medical practitioners through qualitative analysis. Coming across multiple emotionally consuming instances on a daily basis can shift the mental stability and make them more prone to stress and anxiety. This can lead to decreased work efficiency and burnout in severe cases. Barriers like stigma and lack of resources are refraining doctors from seeking help at the right time. Hence, their personal and occupational culture is adversely affected. Transitioning from a newly qualified to an experienced practitioner requires immense hard work and tenacity. However due to compromised assistance many fail to ace their expertise in their respective specialties. Based on the qualitative data collected through interviews, numerous factors can be traced as contributing to burnout of newly qualified doctors. Few notable ones include long working hours, lack of facilities, errors committed during treatment, etc. The goal of this paper is to provide an authentic understanding and to add to the existing literature about the urgency to improve the work settings of doctors especially in a highly populous country like India where there is an elevated demand for patient care. Further, it also aims to remove the societal prejudice imposed over the medical fraternity.

Keywords: *Newly qualified doctors, factors, stress, anxiety, depression, burnout, mental-health*

Stress is a naturally occurring emotion in any human being in a personal or professional setting when facing a difficult circumstance. It can be momentary as a result of a challenging situation or prolonged due to a recurring obstacle. Every professional realm will induce some sort of stress to all working individuals. However frontline workers come across more stress-causing factors which leads to a waning in their mental well-being. A meta-analysis done during the pandemic reveals the following results: the existence of anxiety, depression, and sleep problems was 28.68%, 32.81%, and 50.86% respectively, compared with 25.91%, 26.01%, and 34.08% in Non-frontline areas (Zhang,2024). Dealing

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with the large masses of the public with different ideologies and having a highly social work environment demands a high attention span and gives no scope for any kind of error as it will significantly affect the individual. A substantial number of frontline workers are young doctors. Medical practitioners in India, especially newly qualified ones go through numerous difficulties in the initial stages of their work life trying to adapt to the new work culture to perform soundly. This mandate's a compromise in their physical and most often in their mental health. Many factors like long working hours, mistakes committed during treatment, poor facilities, insufficient personal care and time, loss of young patients, management of attendees, handling fatal patients, high patient flow, and sleep schedule are responsible for this occupational stress. Even Though mental health concerns arise among most of the population, stigmas and societal norms restrict them from seeking the necessary help. Stigma in mental health can be defined as unfavorable ideologies that create a wrong portrayal of psychological disorders. It is deeply influenced by the cultural beliefs and norms set by the society (Ahad, Gonzalez & Junquera,2023). It shapes our mental health literacy in a misguided fashion. Despite undergoing a rigorous educational journey that widens their intelligence about various realms of human health, Indian doctors tend to have a resistance towards instilling changes that benefit their work culture. Infact, recent research reports that medical students overcome anxiety and depression due to their extremely challenging training environment (Pandey,2021). With increasing research studies highlighting the present day scenarios of junior doctors a comprehensive awareness is circulating to the general population and the decision makers in India. However, the public must be more vigilant and socially responsible when encountering circumstances with physicians. By practicing compassionate doctor interactions and being aware of their work paradigms, we can unitedly promote a healthy working environment for the newly appointed doctors.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Managing stress in compelling situations is nearly considered a skill as it demands mental stability, a growth mindset and resilience. Although an inclusive frame of mind can secure the professionals from a taxing situation, in some cases, the medical fraternity as a whole requires a supportive and nurturing work environment. This work culture will enable them to improve proficiency in their job setting. A growing body of research sheds light on the prevailing mental well-being of healthcare professionals. Great number of quantitative and qualitative research have been carried out across India and the globe. An empirical study reported that depression is more prevalent among the medical practitioners of India (Tripathy & Takuldar,2023). Job anxiety is considered as an integral factor contributing to their distress. In a cross-sectional study conducted in a government-funded tertiary care institute in India, about 16.7% of the research participants had suicidal ideations and more than 90% reported burnout (Grover, Sahoo, Bhalla & Avasthi,2023). According to a demographical data study by Rajasekar and Krishnan (2021), in the UK, 10%–20% of doctors experience depression at some point in their careers, in Canada, 80% of physicians experience emotional exhaustion, in the US, doctors show high suicide rates and prescription drug misuse, especially with opioids and benzodiazepines and in New Zealand, mental health problems are nearly three times more common in general practitioners and surgeons than in the general population. The study has also found that non-patient facing specialties and psychiatrists report higher levels of stress. The strenuous work routine involving long working hours with irregular and less frequent breaks should be critically re-examined by the medical council of India. Government intervention and policy reforms are necessary to address these issues and reduce the burden on doctors, ensuring that they can maintain good health and continue to provide quality care to patients. Mental health issues like anxiety, stress, depression are unfortunately compounding to the physical health of

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doctors causing chronic conditions like obesity, hypertension, anaemia etc (Khurana,2023). It is also significant to mention that gender does play a role in determining the stress of healthcare professionals, female doctors being susceptible to depression and suicide (Chandran & Kishore,2017). However, there are also debates that they tend to experience the same mind state regardless of their gender (Bangaru, Challuri, Machavarapu, Pramod, Ravulapati & Sakamudi, 2021). Despite understanding the importance of sound mental health, most professionals refrain from seeking help due to the fear of judgement, creating an emotionally mindful workplace will encourage them to solicit support. Yates (2010) conducted a meta-analysis that stated that increased burnout results in higher rates of medical errors as the physician's mental health is associated with quality of patient care. Further, experimental studies related to the potential measures to alleviate current standards should be conducted to offer a wider understanding of the psychosocial well-being of newly qualified doctors.

METHOD

Objective

The objective of the study is to examine the influential factors on the mental well-being of newly qualified medical professionals.

Research Design

A qualitative research methodology was adopted for collecting the suitable data required for the study through narrative interviews. A range of contrasting viewpoints and opinions were taken into account when constructing the text. This approach has been instrumental in understanding the most prevalent and least common factor that underlies the burnout of medical practitioners. This article brings out many unnoticed and unanswered challenges faced by doctors on an everyday basis during the initial phase of their career. Although the collected data is widespread across various specialties, a generalized interpretation of the factors is discussed. Thorough analysis of the obtained data several times resulted in a precise presentation of the important facts. The expression of true experiences and feedback from the research participants aided in providing a well-rounded and evidence-based explanation.

Sample and Procedure

After seeking necessary permission from the Tamil Nadu Medical Council, the process of data collection was initiated. The research was conducted in Rajiv Gandhi Government Hospital, Chennai, Tamil Nadu and Kilpauk Government Hospital, Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Inferences given by 11 newly qualified medical professionals were recorded through narrative interviews. Prior to approaching the doctors during their time outs, ethical consent was acquired after which questions were posed. They included, to list the stress causing factors in the work environment, to elaborate about their times of burnout (if they had any) and to point out the major reason that disrupts their mental well-being during working hours. Participants were made to be seated in a comfortable and quiet environment before the commencement of the interview thus enabling them to provide the most accurate and honest observations. The sample ranged between the age group of 27 and 33. 4 male and 7 female participants agreed to be a part of this study. Medical professionals from various specializations including General surgery, Orthopedics, Pediatrics, Reconstructive and cosmetic surgery served as samples hence offering a holistic view of the prevailing conditions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The issue of burnout has become more prevalent in India in recent times, also it extends especially to the workers of the clinical field. This paper probes into almost all factors that cause mental distress to doctors in their work setting. From long working hours concerns to significantly affecting scenarios like patient losses and being accountable for mishaps, various critical issues have been unveiled through this study. Comprehensively assessing their work pattern will result in bringing systematic changes that can enhance their professional experience and job satisfaction. The research aims to shed light on various unspoken obstacles in order to offer extended support and guidance with their field of expertise.

Long working hours

The average working time of duty doctors in India is 12-15 hrs/day, this also includes many night shifts. One of the subject's dialogues read that "At many instances we are forced to work over time due to various reasons like high patient flow etc". Cases with crushing emergencies will require their presence even during off-duty hours. Hence 80-90% of time in a week is dedicated to work by a young doctor. This leaves them with lack of sleep and self-care. In turn, they feel exhaustion and a lack of motivation to continue work. Their efficiency in work might decline as the need for rest increases. They report a less tolerance to patient concerns towards the end of their extensive shifts. This will result in degraded quality of patient care which in some cases might lead to deterioration of health of the patient. However, the professionals cannot be blamed for this issue as it is due to shortage of doctors in many rural hospitals. Coping this difficulty can be eased with regular meditation practices and healthy food intake. But, in order to improvise the prevailing working style, a systematic schedule with adequate breaks should be provided to every health care professional.

Mistakes committed during treatment

Medicine is a field of saving lives, however some scenarios of committing errors may result in unexpected turn on patients' condition. Many doctors said that such mistakes will leave them with a strong sense of repentance, which will feel impossible to recover from. It will cause a mental breakdown to the inexperienced doctors. A similar case will be refused to handle by the individual. They will question their expertise and feel unconfident. A sense of guilt and inferiority can make it inefficient to proceed with further treatment to the same patient or different patients. Fear of making a mistake will refrain them from suggesting potent treatment methods. Surgeons report that they go through tough internal battles before resuming with their work. This can also provoke suicidal behavior or lead to psychological disorders in highly sensitive cases which might cause a talented doctor to discontinue work. Sometimes these acts can also be a result of other stress causing factors like exhaustion, personal problems etc. After taking all the precautionary measures if unfortunate incidents occur, the medical professional should be trained to cope with errors and develop resilience. Some cases might also require therapy for the individual to deal with their stress of committing a mistake. It is very essential for every medical setting to have a highly qualified psychologist or counsellor to ensure a healthy working space for doctors.

Poor facilities

The field of medicine is considered the most noble due to the complexities present in it, handling the well-being of thousands of patients can be extremely exhausting for a newly hired medical practitioner. This situation can be mended with good facilities that smoothens the flow of work. Unfortunately, this is not the case in many hospitals in India. A qualitative

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study on the working experience of rural doctors reported that 57% of doctors were dissatisfied about the manpower of supporting staff and facilities provided by the management (Kumar, Vallikunnu, Sarkar, Kar & Harichandrakumar, 2014). After long and tiring working hours, it is essential for doctors to have a safe and comfortable environment to take rest. Some government hospitals fail to fulfil this need for newly qualified medical practitioners, this in turn results in the decision to work in private forums, hence it all ultimately results in the compromise of health care for the underprivileged. It should be made mandatory for hospitals to provide quality food and enhanced on-call rooms with properly sanitized restrooms. Availability of a well-trained counsellor is also considered vital. Repeated unfortunate instances like the R.G. Kar rape-murder case has caused a fear regarding the safety of women medical practitioners. Issues pertaining to this area should be amended with utmost sensitivity and must be eradicated at the earliest to ensure their safety and well-being. Lack of medical supplies needed for treatment is also an issue to be addressed. The FDA (2024) has published a list of medical devices and supplies on shortage and it reads the following: Electrosurgical, Cutting & Coagulation & Accessories; General & Plastic Surgery – Surgical and Infection Control Devices; Cardiovascular - Circulatory Support, Structural and Vascular Devices, etc. Destruction caused in the working process due to unavailability of certain items can lead to nervousness and hence increase the chance of failure. Being unable to convey the reality of the situation to the patient and attendees often makes the professionals anxious and worked-up. As these factors play a major role in their mental health, both government and private hospitals should be keen in providing high quality facilities for their professional and personal welfare.

Insufficient personal care and time

Practicing medicine can be highly draining as it demands service with precision and maximal efforts. A newly recruited professional said that “a rigid schedule of 12- 14 hours for 6 days in a week leaves me with only time to rest before getting back to work again”. Being new to the swift work culture, individuals are able to dedicate little or no time to personal care or family time. This will make them more exhausted both physically and mentally. Compromise on health by skipping meals or having unhealthy food habits can lead to serious medical illnesses and nutrition disorders like anemia, micronutrient deficiencies, etc. Spending greater time for the profession might leave them with a stress of contributing less to family and personal well-being. Awareness about the importance of mental health should be highly propagated amongst new doctors amidst the need to attain occupational success in a competitive arena. Taking regular breaks and engaging in relaxing activities with family and friends is highly necessary and also contributes to clarity of thought. Medical institutions should consider all these aspects as crucial and implement essential changes in the schedules of doctors. Recruitment of occupational therapists is seen as a way of resolving the challenge and ease the burden of doctors.

Loss of young patients

Loss of lives can be the most depressing events in a doctor's work life. In a developing country like India, the contribution of youth is considered highly important. Being unable to save such young patients can cause distress amongst doctors especially when being newly qualified and being in the same age group. This is often phased by doctors working in the emergency unit handling accidents and suicidal cases. Research study shows that ages 15-24 are the most vulnerable in India. It should be noted that many other causes like cancer, genetic conditions, autoimmune diseases and poor sanitation and nutrition conditions result in the fatal condition of youngsters. Medical professionals administering such cases should be appropriately guided by their senior doctors. They should be trained to offer support till

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the last moment of the patient after diagnosing their fatal condition. Getting friendly or close to patients should also be prevented, adhering to professional standards is always recommended as the best way to practice medicine. This can aid in providing the best possible care to the patient and at the same time protecting oneself from a mental breakdown. However, a few pulmonologists and oncologists reported that they find it challenging to maintain a strictly professional boundary with the patient when they are admitted for an extended period of time due to chronic illnesses. At times like this seeking the help of qualified therapists is highly advisable.

Management of attendees

Witnessing the struggle of a loved one can often be more difficult than undergoing oneself's struggles. In case of emergencies, it is the most unexpected which puts people in a state of shock, refraining them from acceptance of the reality. In Indian culture, adversities are dealt in an expressive and emotional manner. They will want to come out of the situation and hence become less patient towards the caretakers and doctors. Providing critical and complex treatment and handling the disruption caused by the attendees, even multiple people at times can be something that is too much to handle for professionals. A practitioner working in the emergency room mentioned that "people with a strong political or social influence tend to demand immediate attention to their patient which leads to a compromised care to more emergent cases from the underprivileged sections of people". There have also been instances reported where the use of abusive and rude language was adopted by attendees to the doctors. With experience in the field, it is said that they will develop a coping mechanism for this kind of behavior. But in the early stages, proper guidance and counsel is required for mental and physical safety.

Handling fatal patients

Oncologists, Plastic surgeons working in the burn units and doctors treating patients with chronic and genetic conditions are more prone to the stress of handling fatal patients. Being through the deteriorating health conditions of patients discourages the mindset of doctors. They feel demotivated and go through a saddening phase of life towards the final stages of the patient. As they should also be emotionally available to them, it is difficult to bring them to a phase of accepting the medical condition. Some patients refuse medical care after knowing about their fatal disease or disorder, but their family will insist on continuing the treatment in wish of extending their loved one's lifetime. A doctor with a year of experience in the field stated that it is extremely stressful to convince both sides regarding proceeding with medical care or withdrawal at the right time when it is no more effective for the patient. Developing a sense of courage and resilience is considered essential to overcome such times. If the situation is becoming overly burdensome, one should never refrain from seeking help from higher authorities.

High patient flow

"Treating an excessive number of patients in a limited time is said to be as stressful as treating a single adverse one" said one of the interviewed doctors. In India a high patient flow is expected during the monsoon and summer seasons due to the temperature conditions (Krishnan et al., 2022). Diseases are prone to spread easily especially in congested areas of the country. Hence flooding of patients is seen in these seasons. Despite striving to provide the utmost medical care to everyone, the large count can lead to compromise in management efficiency. With very few months or years of experience they might feel over pressurized with such inflow of patients. There have also been unfortunate cases of interchanging of case sheets and prescriptions in such scenarios. However, state that times like this can be

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beneficial for them to gain experience and develop precision in service. Systematic management of junior and senior medical professionals is required in order to prevent medical errors like wrong diagnosis, missing and interchanging of patient data, delayed treatment, communication glitches, etc. Online appointments for non-severe conditions and utilization of occupational therapists can help in the betterment of the current situation. Campaigns and promotional undertakings like rallies and drives should be initiated by the government and various other non-profitable organizations to bring awareness to the people about personal and environmental hygiene in order to prevent the spread of communicable diseases.

Sleep schedule

The average sleep acquired by newly qualified medical practitioners in India is 4-6 hours a day. Often it is lower than the average level. Sleep is considered as one of the basic needs as it rests physiological and psychological processes to an extent. It also contributes to brain development and physical growth (Dahl, 2007). It is also considered crucial for performance ability and effective functioning of the brain (Schwarz, Freidle, Van Leeuwen, Åkerstedt & Kecklund, 2023). The field of medicine requires swift decision-making skills and critical thinking. Lack of sleep can scale down the ability to be effective in the workplace. When medical practitioners tend to work with less than adequate amount of sleep, they report to feel tired and lethargic, this in turn has a negative influence on their duty time. When their fatigue reaches an intolerable level, they start questioning their capabilities which results in a lowered degree of motivation to work. Several researchers also report biological ailments like obesity, diabetes and hypertension due to lack of sleep. Availability of convenient and safe on-call rooms is highly essential for the mental well-being of healthcare professionals. Ideal practices like meditation, yoga and walking are also recommended to influence undisturbed sleep patterns.

CONCLUSION

The work of physicians is highly commendable by reason of their commitment and dedication towards service. They prioritize the needs of a patient at all times despite their personal well-being. Multiple factors as explained remain as causes of burnout for doctors. In order to bring them down and provide a peaceful work environment, major societal changes are required. Hiring more professionals, providing enhanced facilities and a systematic time schedule can be listed as few. Both government and private hospitals should take these aspects into account for their better functioning. General public must also treat medical practitioners with respect and give them the benefit of time. Trusting them and following their guidelines is essential for a speedy recovery. Being polite and kind will improve treatment efficiency and make them more approachable. When we join together as a community to be more considerate and cooperative to the medical fraternity, clinical advancements and progresses can be evidently expected.

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Conflict of Interest

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