

The hidden crisis: Prioritising doctors' health and wellbeing

David Wilkinson

IN THE MEDICAL PROFESSION, there exists a paradoxical reality: those dedicated to healing others often neglect our own health and wellbeing. As healthcare systems worldwide face unprecedented pressures, the toll on doctors has reached concerning levels, with burnout, depression and substance use disorders occurring at rates significantly higher than in the general population.

The consequences extend beyond individual suffering. Physician burnout correlates directly with reduced quality of care, increased medical errors, diminished patient satisfaction and higher healthcare costs. When doctors are unwell, the entire healthcare ecosystem suffers.

The culture of medicine has traditionally glorified self-sacrifice and stoicism. Medical training implicitly teaches that personal needs should be subordinated to patient care, creating a professional identity where seeking help is perceived as weakness. This toxic paradigm persists despite overwhelming evidence of its harm.

Systemic factors compound these challenges. Administrative burdens, a confrontational regulatory environment, underfunding and productivity metrics have transformed medical practice into an efficiency-driven enterprise with diminishing opportunities for meaningful patient connection – the very aspect that brings most doctors joy and purpose in their work.

The path forward requires multi-level interventions. Healthcare organisations must recognise physician wellbeing as a quality metric deserving the same attention as patient outcomes and financial performance.

This means creating environments where reasonable workloads, schedule flexibility and administrative support are normalised.

Medical education needs fundamental reform to integrate self-care as a core professional responsibility. Just as we teach evidence-based medicine, we must teach evidence-based approaches to maintaining personal wellbeing.

Individual physicians must also challenge the martyr mindset. Regular physical activity, adequate sleep, nutrition and psychological support are not luxuries but necessities for sustainable practice.

The wellbeing of our healthcare workforce is not peripheral to healthcare quality – it is foundational. By caring properly for those who care for others, we ensure a healthier system for everyone.

Here at the *AJGP*, we are publishing multiple papers that explore and deal with this profoundly important topic, here in this theme issue¹⁻⁴ and also as an ongoing series. These papers link to valuable resources available at www.racgp.org.au/wellbeingforgps. I thank all authors of these papers and especially acknowledge the work of the lead author Dr Shaun Prentice who has made all of this possible.

Author

David Wilkinson BSc (Hons), MBChB, MSc, PhD, FRACGP, Editor-in-Chief, *Australian Journal of General Practice*; National Clinical Lead for Continuing Professional Development, The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, Brisbane, Qld
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correspondence ajgp@racgp.org.au