Editorial

DOI: 10.56412/gmcp.2024.7.02.188

STRESS AND MENTAL FATIGUE IN THE MEDICAL PROFESSION

Dr. Balwinder Kaur Rekhi

The medical profession is often regarded as one of the most rewarding and respected careers, but it is also among the most stressful. Healthcare professionals, including doctors, nurses, paramedics, and medical technicians, are tasked with the immense responsibility of saving lives, making critical decisions, and providing care under high-pressure conditions. Unfortunately, the demands of the profession frequently result in significant stress and mental fatigue, which, if left unaddressed, can severely impact both the health of the individuals in these roles and the quality of patient care.[1] The word "stress" is derived from the Latin term meaning "closer". However, it wasn't until the 18th century that the term evolved to capture the feelings of weariness, suffering, and the far-reaching effects of a challenging life.[2] Many scholars describe stress as a "general adaptation syndrome, " which unfolds in three distinct phases: the alarm, resistance, and exhaustion.[3]

Stress-generating factors - Stress in the medical profession stems from various factors, making it a particularly demanding field. Long working hours, often involving extended shifts, nights, and weekends, lead to exhaustion and burnout, leaving little time for personal life or relaxation.[4] The high workload, with the need to manage numerous patients and meet tight deadlines, compounds this pressure. Additionally, the emotional toll of dealing with life-and-death situations, patient suffering, and trauma can be mentally and emotionally exhausting. Furthermore, the administrative burden-such as documentation, compliance, and other non-medical tasks-detracts from time spent with patients, increasing stress.

Diseases that affect health professionals- Health professionals face a range of health risks due to the demands of their work. These include mental health issues like burnout, anxiety, and PTSD, as well as musculoskeletal problems from physical tasks. They are also at higher risk of infectious diseases, such as respiratory infections and bloodborne illnesses. Cardiovascular diseases, gastrointestinal issues, and sleep disorders are common, often linked to stress and irregular schedules. Lastly, substance use disorders can affect some health professionals, as the stress and emotional strain of their work may lead to alcohol or drug misuse.[5]

Burnout Syndrome - Burnout syndrome is a significant concern in the healthcare profession, characterized by physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged stress. The main symptoms of burnout include chronic fatigue, emotional exhaustion, feelings of reduced accomplishment, and depersonalization, where professionals become detached or indifferent to their patients' needs. Burnout not only affects the well-being of healthcare workers but can also impact the quality of patient care, leading to errors, reduced compassion, and lower overall job satisfaction. Addressing burnout requires systemic changes, including adequate staffing, mental health support, work-life balance, and creating a supportive work environment to help healthcare professionals manage stress and maintain their health.[6]

Coping Strategies - To address this crisis, a series of actions is recommended: eliminating strictly timed, brief patient visits; immediately assembling and fully supporting medical teams; and offering biweekly or monthly Balint groups where healthcare practitioners can discuss challenging clinician-patient relationships in a supportive, empathetic setting. Additionally, front-line clinicians should be allocated time for web-based or in-person stress management and resilience training programs. Encouraging mindful movement and practices like "laying on of hands" can also be beneficial, such as offering paid time for mindful exercise, physical therapy for moderate to severe pain, or massage, in line with the emerging concept of interoception. Healthcare practitioners are invaluable, and it is crucial that we prioritize their health and well-being just as we do that of our patients.[7]