

INVITED EDITORIAL

Love, learning, laughter, and leisure: the ingredients for achieving a better work-life balance

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Although the practice of medicine can be incredibly meaningful and personally fulfilling, it is also demanding, stressful, and can lead to an imbalance between work and personal life. Establishing and maintaining a healthy work-life balance is crucial for doctors (I include medical students in their clinical years under this rubric), not only for their own wellbeing but also for the quality of care they provide to their patients.

With the role of a doctor comes considerable responsibility. Doctors have long, irregular, and arduous working hours to try to meet the seemingly limitless clinical demand. Additionally, they have ongoing training and learning requirements, which are more often than not fulfilled outside of paid working hours.¹ This can lead individuals to have little or no interest in pursuing activities outside of work, as they spend their time resting and recouping before returning to work. A medical student recently said to me, "I realised I needed to move from passive recovery to active recovery." This insight came to them as they were feeling burnout, when rest and sleep had become their priority. They subsequently understood that they had to do more to restore their work-life balance.

Medical training and the nature of the professional expectations placed upon doctors tend to instil a deep sense of commitment and dedication, along with an acceptance that they can and will endure excessive workloads and constant stress. Unfortunately, this can lead to fatigue, demoralisation, and burnout, which in turn will compromise the quality of care they deliver. This negatively affects patient outcomes and may lead to increased medical errors, reduced patient satisfaction, and higher healthcare costs.^{2,3} Alongside this, there is also the cost to a doctor's physical and mental health, as well as their overall well-being, including the impact it has on their interpersonal relationships. A balanced life is crucial to preventing burnout,⁴ which has become a significant and prevalent issue. Burnout may lead to other serious repercussions in one's personal life, including problematic alcohol use, broken relationships, depression, and suicidal ideation. Studies have reported that the impact of poor work-life imbalance can be more significant for those with children, particularly women, as well as those separated from their family and social support networks, such as international students, doctors, and those who have had to relocate for training purposes.⁵

Establishing and maintaining a work-life balance enables doctors to recharge, rejuvenate, and nurture their physical and mental health. Doctors need time to unwind, be with loved ones, pursue hobbies or sports, and engage in activities that bring them joy and fulfilment. The personal life of a doctor is also vital for their professional development. Pursuing interests outside of medicine fosters creativity, empathy, and a broader perspective, which can positively influence a doctor's interactions with patients and colleagues. It allows them to bring diverse experiences and insights into their practice, ultimately improving patient care.

Institutions and healthcare systems, under immense pressure with staffing shortages and an ever increasing demand, can not necessarily be relied on to support doctors in achieving a work-life balance and fostering a culture that values self-care and well-being. Reasonable work hours, working conditions, and access to mental health support are often hard-fought battles, driven by the doctor's unions and doctors themselves.

Achieving a work-life balance is a dynamic and personal journey for individuals, requiring conscious effort and effective strategies.

The L's of Love, Learning, Laughter and Leisure, described below, provide some practical steps to help foster a reasonable balance between professional and personal life:

LOVE:

- > Love by respecting all your patients, irrespective of colour, creed, culture, religion, or social standing.
- > Love or, at the very least, like what you are doing. If this is not the case, then ask yourself, why you are pursuing this career?
- > Love the sense of doing some good for others.
- > Love the sense of achievement your work can bring.
- > Love the privilege of being present in special moments in your patients' lives. For example: remember the thrill of when a baby is born, or that unique moment when you are present when a person leaves this world.
- > Love the others in your life by spending time nurturing your interpersonal relationships at home and at work.

LEARNING

- > Learning: remember the enjoyment you felt when you first learned about a particular topic, completed a certain procedure, or when it suddenly all came together and made sense? In medicine there is always more to learn. Learning does not lead to burnout; instead, it does the opposite: it generates growth and resilience. Stimulate your curiosity and keep your mind agile and receptive to new experiences.
- > Learn to set clear boundaries: define your specific work hours and stick to them as much as possible. Avoid bringing work home or allowing it to encroach into your personal time. This can be difficult when you are required to study for exams and attend to your continuing professional development outside of work hours. When you are off work, try to disconnect from work related emails and calls. Clear communication helps others understand and respect your work-life balance.
- > Learn to prioritise and organise: identify your priorities both at work and in your personal life. Use tools like to-do lists, planners, or applications to organise tasks and allocate time to different re-

sponsibilities. This helps prevent you from feeling overwhelmed and ensures that important tasks are addressed first.

- > Learn to set realistic goals: set achievable goals both at work and in your personal life. Unrealistic expectations can lead to stress and dissatisfaction.
- > Learn to celebrate achievements: no matter how small. This can help you to stay motivated and positive.
- > Learn to say “no”: assess your capacity before taking on additional tasks or responsibilities. Do not overcommit yourself. Saying no when necessary allows you to focus on your existing commitments and maintain balance. Try responding by saying, “I will think about it”. This gives you time to think about the matter, the time commitment, and where it will fit in your schedule.

LAUGHTER

- > Bring back the enjoyment and fun in your work and home life. Have some fun creating and joking about the rituals that help you signal the transition between work and personal life. Examples of this could include something as simple as changing clothes, going to the gym, or spending quality time with family. These rituals help to mentally separate work and personal time.
- > Over the years, doctors have used ‘medical humour’ to bring some laughter to their working day or during times of stress. Humour can be used to relieve stress, tension and to facilitate cohesion.⁶ However, it is important to be mindful of the nature of the humour being used, as this can often be an indicator of unhappiness, demoralisation, and burnout among doctors and students who use it. It may also be used to disparage, ridicule, prejudice, or bully.

LEISURE

- > In addition to entertainment options, such as movies, shows or dining out, try to also participate in leisure activities that bring fulfilment, growth, and a sense of purpose.
- > Engage in activities that promote your physical, mental, and emotional well-being, such as exercise, meditation, hobbies, or spending time with loved ones.
- > Engage in leisure activities that challenge you both physically and intellectually, requiring you to strategise and adapt. This promotes resilience and provides a sense of achievement and satisfaction.
- > Leisure activities often involve social interaction and fostering connection with like-minded individuals. Whether through sports, volunteering, or shared interests, these activities create opportunities to build friendships, strengthen relationships and enhance social well-being.
- > Try limiting your screen time and establish tech-free zones during your personal time. Constant connectivity can blur the lines between work and personal life, so creating boundaries with technology is crucial for maintaining a healthy balance.

In conclusion, the significance of doctors maintaining a work-life balance cannot be overstated and a well-balanced integration of professional and private life is an essential goal for the new generation of doctors.

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