Can we be doctors and still have a life?

Samantha King

“How can I have a life outside of medical school?” This was a question asked of the Wellness panel at the recent New Zealand Medical Students’ Association (NZMSA) conference. Have you ever felt like this? Have you wondered how you will cope being a doctor? Dr Samantha King, Medical Adviser for the Medical Protection Society (MPS), discusses work/life balance, wellbeing, and mitigating the risk of burnout.

As a Medical Adviser with the MPS, I hear first-hand the stress experienced by clinicians when they receive a complaint, when something unexpected happens such as an adverse outcome, or if there are concerns raised about their competence or professionalism. I also speak at and facilitate workshops on burnout around New Zealand. I have found that clinicians throughout New Zealand are experiencing increased pressure resulting from factors such as underfunding and increasing patient numbers. This pressure is contributing to a rise in burnout in our profession.

What is burnout?

“Burnout occurs when passionate, committed people become deeply disillusioned with a job or career from which they have previously derived much of their identity and meaning. It comes as the things that inspire passion and enthusiasm are stripped away, and tedious or unpleasant things crowd in.”

Burnout is a measurable analysis of “stress”, with the most commonly used measure being the Maslach Burnout Inventory Triad of:

- Emotional exhaustion (your energy levels)
- Low sense of personal accomplishment (sense of satisfaction)
- Depersonalisation (an increase in cynicism or distancing ourselves from others)

Are students also struggling with burnout? I had the privilege of participating in the 2019 NZMSA Conference. One plenary session on student wellbeing was very well attended and really struck a chord with the delegates. When I heard the passion and genuine fears of the delegates on the topic of wellbeing, I came to the realisation that the pressures on students today are far greater than in my day as a student. Medicine is far more complex, and patient numbers and increasing patient numbers. This pressure is contributing to a rise in burnout in our profession.

The likelihood of experiencing burnout

Studies indicate that in the USA and UK, the incidence of doctor burnout is about 50%. In New Zealand, a recent survey of senior medical officers in the public sector found that 50% of respondents were suffering from burnout. MPS conducted a survey of members in 2019, as part of its “Breaking the Burnout Cycle” campaign. Of the 300 respondents, 41% had considered leaving the profession for reasons of personal wellbeing. Nearly half of the respondents (44%) were not satisfied with their work/life balance, and 35% suspected that emotional exhaustion had contributed to an irreversible clinical error, with 58% of them saying this was due to a lack of concentration.

Sadly, medical students do also suffer from burnout. A study of medical students in Australia found that medical students were more likely to suffer from emotional exhaustion (one of the key measures of burnout) and have a higher incidence of depression compared to the general population. Female, indigenous, and mature students (over 26 years) were at greater risk of developing depression or psychological distress than medical students outside of these groups. These are sobering statistics.

By now you may be wondering if you should have gone into retail! Let me reassure you that you are resilient. You must be, or you would never have survived the selection process to get into medical school. However, regardless of how resilient we are, we all have a breaking point when placed under enough pressure. The great news is that you can build your resilience to reduce your risk of burnout and have a very long and successful career as a doctor.

Avoiding burnout

There are some steps you can take to avoid burnout:

1. Maintain social connections

When we are feeling pressured and feel like we are failing, we often want to hide so that no one else can see that we are struggling. Shawn Achor, a Harvard researcher states, “The people who survive stress the best are the ones who actually increase their social investments in the middle of stress, which is the opposite of what most of us do.”

Even with a rigorous study schedule, make time to spend with friends and loved ones who “fill your tank.”
2. BE SENSIBLE ABOUT THE HOURS YOU SPEND STUDYING AND TAKE REGULAR BREAKS
When we are HALTED (hungry, angry, late, tired, energy depleted, or distracted) we never perform at our best. Taking even a short time out aids recovery so that we can continue to perform well. Remember, you are not a machine.

3. ADOPT A PROGRAMME OF REGULAR PHYSICAL EXERCISE
Exercise not only serves to release endorphins, but also as an outlet for the built-up tension you carry. Developing the positive habit of regular exercise can benefit you, both body and mind.

4. BE KIND TO YOURSELF, AND LESS CRITICAL AND DEMANDING OF YOUR EFFORTS
Many of us are perfectionists, so we have extremely high expectations of ourselves and others which are unrealistic. Judging all your day-to-day efforts through a clouded filter of negativity will create great distress. When we fail to meet our expectations, we often beat ourselves up and feel a sense of shame. Nobody is perfect. Learn to be kind to yourself by practising self-compassion. A resource you may find helpful is Dr Kristin Neff’s website about self-compassion. You may also find Brené Brown’s book, The Gifts of Imperfection, very helpful.

The role of universities and hospitals
Do the environments in which we work and study have an impact on our risk of burnout? The short answer is: yes. Evidence shows that organisational interventions have a greater effect than individual interventions.

MPS recommends:
> Every doctor in New Zealand should have access to someone trained to recognise burnout and offer support, and
> That medical schools and postgraduate training bodies should have a role to play in instilling the right behaviours.
> They have a clear responsibility in laying healthy foundations for doctors and other healthcare professionals during their training and supporting them in their professional career development.
> They should establish comprehensive standards for doctors’ wellbeing at every career stage and measure those standards.
> They should also provide scholars with obligatory training in general wellbeing in the workplace, in building resilience, and how to develop good individual coping strategies.

A consensus statement from university medical schools across Australia and New Zealand make similar recommendations. We understand that the University of Auckland Medical School are rolling out a scheme to ensure wellbeing in their medical students, and we look forward to seeing how this develops.

How MPS is assisting members
Based on our survey results and our work with doctors around the world, we have been able to identify some concrete recommendations which are aimed at the doctor, the healthcare team, and the wider healthcare system. If taken seriously, these recommendations would help to mitigate the risks of burnout in the profession. We assist members with ongoing learning and help reduce medicolegal risk. As part of our comprehensive education and risk protection programme, we introduced a workshop: Building Resilience and Avoiding Burnout (BRAB). The intended learning outcomes of this workshop are to review, recognise, and respect the need to build individual and organisational resilience and to develop strategies to avoid burnout when resilience is challenged.

The feedback we get from doctors who undergo our risk protection training is incredibly positive. MPS is presenting two BRAB workshops specifically for fifth year students and trainee interns, in Auckland and Dunedin in 2020. E-mails inviting these students to regist
About the author

Dr Samantha King, MBChB, FRNZCGP, Dip Obs, LLM. Sam has been with MPS since 2012 and now works full time as a Medical Adviser whilst still doing some clinical work. As a member of the Medical Protection faculty, she regularly presents at workshops, conferences and practices throughout New Zealand. Sam is married with 3 children. She enjoys kayaking and fishing.

Correspondence

Dr Samantha King: Samantha.King@medicalprotection.org