Editorials
Who cares for the clinicians?
The mental health crisis in the GP workforce

THE RISE OF STRESS AND ANXIETY

The fact that a significant proportion of the UK's GPs are living with mental health problems has been known for some time. Studies have shown that many GPs are depressed, anxious, stressed, or 'burnt out' as a result of practice pressures such as organisational changes and increased workload, the negative media climate, and a sense of isolation.[1]

There is evidence that GPs have difficulty accessing appropriate mental health or support services,[2] for reasons around availability or concerns about confidentiality. Doctors are more likely than the general population to die by suicide, with female doctors, anaesthetists, GPs, and psychiatrists being the most vulnerable.[3] Some clinicians experience alcohol addiction as a result of the pressures of practice.[4]

Just as they would for any other member of the population, mental health difficulties take their toll on all aspects of GPs' lives, including self-esteem, personal relationships, finance, work–life balance, and work performance. However, despite the clear and critical effect on GPs themselves, it is striking how frequently existing narratives suggest that physician health only matters because of its potential negative impact on patients. While doctors are encouraged to see their patients holistically, they are often not afforded the same treatment themselves.[5] That doctors themselves can become patients is often overlooked,[6] and there are many internal and external barriers to doctors adopting the patient role. The drive to support patients may limit awareness of self-care strategies; this may detract from GPs' ability to recognise and live with their own mental illness, and their ability to seek help.

Similarly, the language around physician self-care often places responsibility for good mental health with doctors themselves, rather than those who decide on their workload; a workload which has increased by 16% over the past 7 years[7] while GP recruitment has dwindled. Many proposed interventions emphasise GP time management and the development of 'resilience', and encourage solutions such as mindfulness. In contrast, there is little work on how organisations can better support their workforce and how the

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systemic factors contributing to mental ill health can be addressed.

THE ISSUE OF INVULNERABILITY

There is a culture of invulnerability among doctors, which starts during training, and which needs to be questioned and better understood. Creating a belief that doctors are impervious to illness is not always helpful. It is important for GPs to recognise the power of the emotional and physical challenges they face during their practice. While other emotionally demanding professions, such as psychotherapy, offer regular supportive supervision, GPs are often left to manage their emotional responses to their patients alone.

The concept of 'presenteeism' is frequently mentioned within the literature as both a contributor to stress and a barrier to help seeking.[8] However, there is a tendency to simplify the issue, characterising this construct as simply a refusal on the part of GPs to admit that they are ill. The reasons for presenteeism may be complex, and more than simply a reflection of GPs' unwillingness to acknowledge they are unwell or require sick leave. GPs may continue working because they do not wish to let their colleagues down. Some may feel they have no choice. Faced with workforce shortages and difficulty finding locums, GPs are at times forced to work when they are unwell. All these factors can contribute to an unhealthy tendency to ignore illness and continue to work.

We, the authors of this editorial, are a team that includes researchers, GPs, medical students, and patient and public contributors. We have been funded by the National Institute for Health Research School for Primary Care Research to conduct a qualitative study of the experiences of GPs living with mental health problems. We aim to identify what helps and hinders GPs when they seek treatment, so that in future their access to appropriate care and support will be greatly improved. We have recruited for our study using social media, particularly Twitter, and have been overwhelmed by the high level of interest from GPs. Our Twitter account (@GPWellbeing) has been a great way to generate enthusiasm about the project, and to talk to others concerned with similar issues. Twitter seems especially relevant for recruitment to this particular study. Given the fact that our potential participants are overworked, a short tweet is a more effective way to let people know about the research than the more 'traditional' lengthy invitation letter and information sheet. We believe that our findings will uncover some of the complex psychosociocultural factors which perpetuate and contribute to the stigma around mental health which persists within medicine, as well as unpacking the multiple barriers that may prevent GPs from seeking help. The majority of our data has been collected, and we hope to be ready to publish in early 2017.

EXISTING PEER-SUPPORT

This critical situation in which GPs in

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ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE
Johanna Spiers
University of Bristol, Canynge Hall, 39 Whatley Road, Bristol BS8 2PS, UK.

E-mail: js16447@bristol.ac.uk

@GPWellbeing

particular, and doctors as a whole, find themselves is highlighted by the emergence of Facebook groups such as Resilient GP, GP Survival, and Tea & Empathy, which indicate a grass roots response to the issues. The situation is also being addressed by campaigns such as the Royal Medical Benevolent Fund's (RMBF, chaired by *BJGP*'s Editor Professor Roger Jones) 'What's Up Doc', which has provided a guide called *The Vital Signs*,[9] designed to help doctors recognise and cope with symptoms of stress and burnout. The Practitioner Health Programme already runs an excellent local specialist service helping doctors and dentists living in London with mental health concerns; services outside London are limited. Additionally, the Department of Health is investing in an occupational health service for doctors living with mental health problems,[10] and the recent *General Practice Forward View* document from NHS England promises to provide support for GPs with stress and burnout.[11] However, some local services such as the GP and NHS Dentist Physician Health (GPDPH) in Cornwall, which have helped around 1000 GPs and dentists over 20 years, have been threatened with closure due to reduced funding. Further action is needed to respond to the size of the crisis.

We echo Patterson's recent call for action,[12] and applaud NHS England's commitment to the provision of a specialist mental health service for GPs. While we welcome this current direction of travel, the government should also focus its efforts and finances on the causes of mental health problems in healthcare professionals (such as increasing workloads compounded by workforce shortages) to prevent GPs from becoming unwell in the first instance.

The collegiate culture of general practice (and medicine in general) should arguably balance cure with care; with appropriate support and nurture, colleagues may find it easier to talk about their vulnerabilities and the possibility of being unwell, and receive the timely support and treatment which they need.

Johanna Spiers,
Senior Research Associate, Centre for Academic Primary Care, University of Bristol, Bristol.

Marta Buszewicz,
Reader in Primary Care, Research Department of Primary Care & Population Health, University College London, London.

Carolyn Chew-Graham,
Professor of General Practice Research, Research Institute, Primary Care and Health Sciences, Keele University, Keele.

Clare Gerada,
Medical Director, Practitioner Health Programme, Riverside Medical Centre, London.

David Kessler,
Reader in Primary Care, Centre for Academic Primary Care, University of Bristol, Bristol.

Nick Leggett,
Patient and Public Contributor, Centre for Academic Primary Care, University of Bristol, Bristol.

Chris Manning,
Director, Upstream Healthcare, Convenor, Action for NHS Wellbeing, Chair Mental Health Group, College of Medicine, London.

Anna Taylor,
Medical Student, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Bristol, Bristol.

Gail Thornton,
Patient and Public Contributor, Centre for Academic Primary Care, University of Bristol, Bristol.

Ruth Riley,
Senior Research Associate, Centre for Academic Primary Care, University of Bristol, Bristol.

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