

Being a medical student – a holistic approach

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I have always had a wide range of interests including art, literature, history, music, and travel. Having difficulty restricting my learning to one subject area during my medical course, I was drawn to the holism component as a way to put my training into perspective. In terms of patient care, the holistic approach seems helpful in building rapport and increasing compliance and patient satisfaction. Personally, my aim is to build a healthy work-life ratio to protect against 'burnout' and other stress-related health problems.

Summary

Following the publication in the August issue of the winner of the BHMA student essay competition, in this issue a 4th year medical student gives her view on holistic self-care.

Given that medical students train in an environment that naturally breeds stress and burnout, it is quite astonishing that more emphasis is not placed on self-care, stress reduction and wellbeing in medicine.

It is very easy to see medical school as a competitive environment in which you must push yourself past your limits in order to succeed, ignoring any personal problems or health complaints which one may feel are a weakness that 'just cannot be dealt with now'. This feeling is even more apparent given the present failure of the NHS training systems, which is leaving many doctors jobless, and furthermore has induced tremendous anxiety and a sense of hopelessness among the student body. This sort of crisis can make it even more difficult to allow space and time for personal wellbeing, especially in the light of the advice to join a multitude of medical school societies, volunteer during what little free time is available, enter writing competitions, and (not to forget) join the rugby team in order to appear well-rounded on job application forms.

In order to be well, we need to spend time doing (or not doing) the

things that we enjoy. It is important to be able to take a step out from under the pressure and see the whole picture. We can only put what we do into context if we are able to escape it once in a while, and to me that should not include time spent involving oneself in activities purely to win application form points.

A holistic approach emphasises the importance of self-care in medical practitioners and medical students. It is important to give attention to one's own needs in order to survive in a medical environment as well as to treat others effectively. Medical student's self-care and stress management habits deteriorate during the course of their study.¹ Alcohol consumption increases over time, whilst socialisation and exercise decreases. Perhaps not surprisingly, students are more prone to depression at finals than when they started out with their medical studies.

A wellness resource guide produced by The American Medical Student Association (AMSA)² points out that wellness is a multifaceted state that encompasses us in wholeness, meaning that in order to be well, we must be in health physically, emotionally, socially, intellectually,

vocationally and spiritually. This guide points out that it is a challenge to maintain holistic wellness when undergoing medical training, but reminds us that a doctor cannot look after and treat others if they are unable to care for themselves first. This guide gives suggestions on methods for improving wellness in all areas, including yoga, meditation, stress management ideas, breathing exercises, nutritional advices and tips on sleeping better. AMSA recognises that along with the excitement of medical school comes stress and anxiety, and that medical students often fail to address these in the pursuit of achievement. It points out that the way we take care of ourselves affects the way we take care of others, thus it is vitally important to be aware of this and readdress the balance between work and self-care.

There is evidence that burnout is prevalent among medical students, nurses, and

doctors in training. The stress of internship can lead to psychological morbidity and burnout in some, and it is therefore vital to have programmes in operation to facilitate coping and prevent this from developing.³ Burnout is common in trainee doctors, as well as among other healthcare workers.⁴ Distress in medical students can spill over into the workplace later on, leading to cynicism, undermining patient care and relationships with other staff, as well as ultimately creating a culture of flagging morale and despair in the medical profession.⁵

I would hope that in future, specific group sessions focusing on relaxation activities and therapies could be made more readily available to patients, healthcare workers and medical students. I hope to do more of the activities that I personally find stress-relieving, such as practising yoga and allowing time to cook healthy meals. I also believe that many patients, especially those living with chronic illness, can benefit from incorporating these sorts of therapies into their treatment regime, in order to approach an illness holistically. It is important to ensure patients are in the right state of mind to facilitate recovery, to cope with chronic pain, sickness

or disability. Several research groups have demonstrated the phenomenon of the mind-body connection and the importance of a healthy mind in dealing with chronic disease, especially in living with pain.^{6,7}

Personally I am particularly intrigued by the vast impact that the mind has on the body, and how knowing this can lead to better treatment and management of patients. It seems likely that treating patients holistically would lead to better compliance with treatment and improve a patient's overall state, especially in terms of maintenance of mental health, motivation to comply

with treatment, and better management of coexisting disease/disability.

It is perhaps now – more than ever, given the mounting pressure of limited training places – imperative that more energy is put into maintaining a well-balanced student body, and to ensuring that adequate

support systems are in place for trainee doctors. The nation needs to look after its workforce so that in turn it can look after the nation.



'In order to be well, we need to spend time doing the things that we enjoy.'

References

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