Stress in the workplace amongst medical professionals

The paper on stress in doctors from India and Malaysia in this month’s Journal of Postgraduate Medicine is a timely and welcome addition from Asia on the subject of bullying. Such studies are inherently biased in that individuals only answer questions when they have a point to make and all answers are often linked (thus the need for multivariate analyses which were not performed here) resulting in those who answer yes to one question answering yes to all of them. However, the authors importantly found that para-medical as well as medical personnel were often bullied and such bullying goes unreported. The latter finding is not surprising as many were not sure how to complain, while others were afraid.

Stress is an unavoidable and common aspect of a doctor’s and researcher’s work. It may have positive aspects in that some individuals may feel challenged and raise productivity to meet increasing demands, however, in junior doctors, work-related stress and anxiety have been shown to lead to low morale and poorer work performance and to affect the quality of care provided.

A number of studies have shown that one specific stressor, workplace bullying, is frequently experienced by junior doctors and leads to reduced job satisfaction, depression and anxiety, sickness, absence and intention to leave. The problem has however been difficult to study, for individual responses to stressful situations vary and certain people are more likely to perceive high levels of stress in their job than others. In addition to this, a generally accepted definition of workplace bullying is lacking although it appears to refer to situations in which someone is subjected to social isolation or exclusion, his or her work and efforts are devalued and he or she is frustrated, often threatened and perhaps even abused.

Stress and bullying lead to a cycle in which poor health may result and this may in turn result in an increased susceptibility to becoming a victim of bullying.

Though the need for help for stress in doctors, particularly junior ones is widely recognized, it is usually considered that the causes rest within the working conditions which entail long hours of work, disruption of sleeping patterns and dealing with seriously ill people.

In recent years, efforts have been made in Europe to improve working conditions and training for doctors and stress counseling is becoming commonplace. It appears that unsurprisingly, the same lessons apply in India. Several European countries, including England, Sweden, Norway and Finland have implemented general preventative action against workplace bullying. These have included, for example, efforts to increase public awareness, funding for research into stress and bullying and the establishment of protective legislation. A reduction is not only likely to help those being bullied and suffering stress but would also bring economic and other benefits to employers.

Work-related stress can affect a doctor’s health and result in poor morale and motivation, poor communication and decision-making as well as poor relationships with colleagues. It also has financial implications through doctors taking sick leave or ceasing to practice medicine. Providing a more supportive work environment with appropriate attention to workloads and provision of guidelines illustrating good practice in supervision may help to protect the health of medical staff doing research. Interestingly, teachers who take a course in human relations appear to suffer less stress, although the relationship between a relatively new position (in this case a physician undertaking research) and stress is poorly understood.

It is easy to conclude from the papers on the subject that bullying is a serious threat to psychological health. People do not think of themselves as bullies. They tell themselves that they are just being assertive, giving strong leadership or disinclined to suffer fools gladly. So it might be salutary to visit http://www.bullyonline.org/workbully/serial.htm to check out your management style and make sure that the place where you work really does have an anti-bullying ethos.

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References


