

Why Self-care Matters for You and Your Registrar

Presenter: Dr Shaun Prentice
(Registered Psychologist and Research Officer, RACGP)

Overview

Dr Shaun Prentice explored why self-care and wellbeing should be viewed not as optional extras, but as essential components of professional practice. Drawing on his research into doctor wellbeing, including some undertaken in collaboration with GPSA, he described the factors that influence GP wellbeing, the consequences of burnout for doctors, patients and practices, and practical strategies supervisors can use to support both themselves and their registrars. Throughout the session he emphasised that wellbeing is both a professional responsibility and a personal right, and that supervisors play a pivotal role in modelling healthy and sustainable professional practice.

Why wellbeing matters

Shaun began by examining why doctor wellbeing deserves attention beyond simply "looking after ourselves." Evidence demonstrates that poor wellbeing and burnout have significant consequences for patient care, professional satisfaction and workforce sustainability.

Burnout has been associated with:

- poorer quality clinical care
- increased inappropriate prescribing and investigation
- higher rates of reported clinical errors
- reduced patient satisfaction
- impaired team functioning
- burnout spreading within clinical teams ("burnout contagion")
- increased workforce turnover.

He noted that burnout carries enormous personal and financial costs for healthcare systems and argued that protecting clinician wellbeing ultimately benefits patients as well as doctors.

Self-care as a professional responsibility

Referring to the [Medical Board of Australia's Good Medical Practice: Code of Conduct](#), Shaun highlighted that doctors have an explicit professional responsibility to care for their own health.

However, he suggested that self-care should not simply be viewed as an obligation. Instead, it should be recognised as something doctors deserve in the same way they encourage patients to care for their own health.

He reflected that if doctors devote their careers to improving the wellbeing of others, they should value their own wellbeing equally highly.

Webinar

Topic Summary

Understanding wellbeing

Shaun presented a model of wellbeing developed through research with GP registrars and supervisors. The model distinguishes between:

- Personal wellbeing, encompassing relationships, health and life outside medicine.
- Professional wellbeing, including meaningful clinical work, teaching and professional identity.

Central to the model is the concept of a "wellbeing reservoir."

Activities that align with an individual's values replenish this reservoir and sustain wellbeing, whereas prolonged engagement in work that conflicts with personal values gradually depletes it. He described burnout as a state of chronic value frustration, where clinicians spend increasing amounts of time undertaking work that no longer feels meaningful or aligned with what originally drew them into medicine. Research presented during the session demonstrated a clear relationship between doctors living according to their values and higher levels of wellbeing.

Threats to wellbeing

Shaun described wellbeing as being influenced by multiple interacting factors operating at different levels.

Personal factors

These include:

- family and relationship stress
- financial pressures
- personality traits such as perfectionism
- pre-existing mental health vulnerabilities
- availability of social support.

Professional factors

General practice itself presents many challenges, including:

- diagnostic uncertainty
- increasing mental health presentations
- vicarious trauma
- administrative burden
- negative clinical outcomes.

For supervisors, additional demands include:

- supporting struggling registrars
- assessment responsibilities
- balancing supervision with clinical work
- the emotional investment involved in teaching registrars who later move elsewhere.

Despite these challenges, supervision was also recognised as a significant source of meaning and professional satisfaction through contributing to the next generation of GPs.

The importance of practice culture

A recurring theme was that wellbeing is not solely an individual responsibility. Supportive practices help sustain supervisors by providing:

- realistic supervision workloads
- administrative support
- flexibility
- opportunities for supervisors to work together
- recognition of the educational value of supervision.

Shaun noted that practices with multiple supervisors often provide better support for both supervisors and registrars through shared learning, debriefing and mutual assistance.

General practice, isolation and transition

During discussion, Simon Morgan reflected on the significant transition registrars experience when moving from hospital medicine into community general practice. While general practice may be more accepting of conversations about wellbeing than hospital medicine, it can also be considerably more isolating. Registrars suddenly move from highly team-based environments into consulting independently with significant clinical responsibility.

Shaun agreed that this combination of increased responsibility, professional isolation and diagnostic uncertainty makes the transition into general practice a particularly vulnerable period for registrar wellbeing.

Practical strategies for supervisors

Shaun concluded by outlining practical approaches that supervisors can adopt to promote sustainable wellbeing.

These included:

- matching supervisory responsibilities to experience
- maintaining clear professional boundaries
- taking meaningful time away from work rather than simply taking leave
- recognising perfectionism and imposter syndrome
- understanding personal values and ensuring work aligns with them
- building supportive supervisory teams
- encouraging delegation of administrative tasks
- developing practice cultures that actively support wellbeing
- facilitating access to confidential wellbeing resources where needed.

He stressed that wellbeing should be viewed as an ongoing process requiring continual attention rather than something addressed only when burnout develops.

Complexity, uncertainty and supervision

The discussion also linked wellbeing to the increasing complexity of modern general practice. Shaun noted that registrars often struggle with uncertainty following the transition from hospital medicine, where patients are generally more differentiated and supported by larger teams.

He suggested that supervisors who themselves have difficulty tolerating uncertainty may unintentionally increase registrar stress through unrealistic expectations or excessive oversight.

Developing comfort with uncertainty—for both supervisors and registrars—was presented as an important contributor to sustainable clinical practice.

Key messages

- Wellbeing is both a professional responsibility and a personal right.
- Burnout affects patient care, team functioning and workforce sustainability.
- Sustainable wellbeing depends on work aligning with personal values.
- Supervisor wellbeing is influenced by individual, workplace and system-level factors.
- General practice can be professionally rewarding but also isolating, particularly during the transition from hospital practice.
- Supervisors play an important role in modelling healthy boundaries, self-care and sustainable ways of practising medicine.
- Team-based supervision, supportive practice cultures and shared responsibility help promote wellbeing for both supervisors and registrars.
- Developing tolerance of uncertainty is closely linked to both clinician wellbeing and effective supervision

Reference

[Prentice S, Elliott T, Dorstyn D, Benson J. Risk factors for burnout in Australian general practice registrars: A qualitative study. Aust J Gen Pract. 2025 Nov;54\(11\):778-783.](#)