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Reducing Burnout, Suicide & Wellbeing among Healthcare Professionals: The Importance of Belonging

Abstract

Recently the lack of well-being, higher rates of burnout and reports of suicide in healthcare professionals have become an area of concern for organisations. Physician and nurse suicides are a worry and subject of increasing professional and public health interest. Despite good resources to help others, healthcare workers are sacrificing their well-being. Moreover, systemic barriers by organisational culture and policy are often preventing self-care or help-seeking actions.

Key words

Healthcare professionals, burnout, suicide, belonging

Introduction

Stress affects individuals from any age and professional area. When it is caused by work complications is called occupational stress, which can be physical, social or psychological. Whereas Burnout Syndrome, is characterized by emotional exhaustion, leading to lack of professional accomplishment and depersonalisation. In recent years, there has been a decline in the well-being of healthcare professionals (HCP), marked by an increase in burnout rates and the reports of suicides. Healthcare, as an industry, places numerous pressures on healthcare providers, including the challenges of clinical work, time constraints, competing demands, lack of control over work processes and scheduling, and conflicting roles

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and relationships with leadership.¹ Surveys estimate that burnout may affect 10–70% of nurses, physicians and variably among other HCPs.²

These trends have triggered concerns within healthcare organisations (HCO) and drawn the attention of their leaders. More worryingly, there is incontrovertible evidence that greater burnout among HCPs is associated with poorer-quality healthcare and reduced safety for patients.³ At the core of every HCP's values, lies the desire to serve and care for their fellow human beings. However, often HCPs find themselves willingly making personal sacrifices⁴ that may jeopardise their own well-being, or on occasions face violence and aggression in the line of duty. Furthermore, entrenched systemic barriers stemming from societal bias, flawed organisational culture or punitive policies⁵ and unsupportive environments may obstruct efforts towards self-care or seeking assistance.

Belonging

In order to sustain a healthy and happy workforce for every small and large employing HCOs such as the UK National Health Service (NHS), which employs over 1.3 million staff, prioritising the well-being of the workforce is crucial. Yet it is disheartening to observe that systemic bias exists and for many staff from minority backgrounds, a sense of belonging can remain elusive.⁶ Implementing a cultural shift away from blame and stigmatisation, and towards shared responsibility and empathy creates a nurturing environment.

A sense of belonging – the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences – is a fundamental human need that predicts numerous mental, physical, social, economic, and behavioural outcomes.⁷ Sense of belonging, which encourages engagement, and promotes collegiality, may reduce burnout.⁸ It is theorised that the nature of belonging is multifaceted, with one school of thought emphasising two fundamental aspects: 1) ownership and 2) feeling accepted.¹ It is important to view belonging as the realisation of being a genuine and integral part of something bigger than oneself, such as the relationship between an organisation and its workforce.

When individuals feel they belong, they are more likely to seek support, engage actively in learning, and perform better.⁹ Nurturing a sense of belonging is fundamental for improving the well-being of HCPs at work. They are more likely to experience job satisfaction, engagement, and resilience in the face of stress and adversity. Organisations can create an inclusive environment that fosters belonging by promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion and by encouraging open communication and collaboration among team members.

Burnout

Burnout is a pervasive issue within the healthcare profession, characterised by a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion resulting from the demands of taxing work situations¹⁰. The consequences of burnout are far-reaching, affecting not only the individual HCP but also patient care and the overall functioning of healthcare organisations. Stress and burnout are significant contributors to physical and psychological health problems among HCPs¹¹.

Various factors contribute to burnout, including occupation, psychological conditions (such as psychiatric diseases, stress, anxiety, and depression), coping styles, work organisation (including workload, working conditions, and the availability of staff and materials), and the challenges posed by events like the coronavirus pandemic^{12,13}. Recognising these factors is the first step toward addressing and mitigating burnout.

The well-being of HCPs is important not only for the workers themselves, but also when considering patient safety. It is well established that HCPs' well-being can impact their ability to provide safe and effective care. When HCPs are physically and mentally well, they are more alert, focused, and less prone to errors. Conversely, burnout, stress, and exhaustion can lead to lapses in judgment, decreased attention to detail, and increased risk of errors, all of which can jeopardise patient safety. Moreover, HCPs who feel supported and valued are more likely to maintain high levels of job satisfaction and commitment to their patients, fostering a culture of patient-centred care that further enhances safety. Thus, the well-being of HCPs is not only a

matter of ethical concern but also an essential component of maintaining the highest standards of patient safety and quality healthcare delivery.

Suicide

The World Health Organization in 2012 estimated that one million people commit suicide yearly. Acts of suicide are more prevalent than acts of war and homicide combined, and is ranked as the 13th leading cause of death in the world. A completed suicide in the workplace takes an emotional toll on surviving colleagues, it is critical for employers to understand the phenomenon of suicide and why certain employees may be at risk. HCPs are prone to compassion fatigue, work-related stresses and suicide at a greater rate than the general population, with surgeons reporting up to three times more thoughts of suicide than the general population.¹⁴ Of the many factors contributing to suicide risk, Asian ancestry or work related issues or civil litigation were amongst the leading ones, as well as substance abuse.^{15,16} Women and medical HCPs in some specialties might be at higher risk such as anesthesiologists, psychiatrists, general practitioners and general surgeons.¹⁷ Among HCPs in India, academic stress is the leading cause of suicides, followed by mental illness and harassment. Stressfully long working hours, starvation for long hours, inadequate diet, sleep deprivation, inadequate rest, high levels of personal expectations, knowledge of lethal suicide methods, easy access to potentially fatal drugs, apathy, and fearlessness towards death are some of the contributing factors.¹⁸

A low sense of belonging has a weak association with suicidality.¹⁹ Sense of belonging is directly related to depression and hopelessness, while indirectly related to suicidal ideation. Low sense of belonging provides an important target for assessment and intervention in the treatment of depression. The interpersonal theory of suicide postulates that suicide occurs because of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness, combined with a capability for committing suicide.²⁰ Cognitive, behavioural, and interpersonal interventions may help improve an individual's sense of belonging and

decrease symptoms of depression and hopelessness.²¹

What can organisations do?

Recognising the fundamental human need for belonging, healthcare organisations must take proactive steps to foster a sense of belonging among their employees⁶. This includes creating opportunities for regular and positive interactions with colleagues and supervisors while cultivating an environment characterised by enduring care and concern¹. By doing so, organisations can reduce the risk of burnout and its associated negative consequences⁶. A sense of belonging at work can serve as a protective factor against burnout by providing healthcare professionals with the support and connection they need to thrive in their roles.

The importance of these elements cannot be overstated, and they serve as a clear signal to organisations, policymakers, and healthcare managers. It is important that efforts are dedicated to developing programs aimed at enhancing well-being, by focusing on workforce belonging within healthcare organisations. This proactive approach is vital in preventing burnout and its negative implications for the workforce⁷. Ultimately, investing in the well-being of healthcare workers not only enhances their personal lives but also leads to better patient outcomes and the sustainability of the healthcare system overall. Many strategies to foster a sense of belonging in the workplace have been suggested, including, but not limited to, mentorship, sponsorship, affinity groups, dashboards, and surveys. Leaderships should acknowledge DEI initiatives, promoting efforts to enhance inclusiveness and mitigate tokenism. Amid DEI criticism and backlash, it is important to continue to promote education and positive discussions and aim for cultural changes targeting rooted systemic racism and discrimination, which continue to impose an obstacle to DEIB achievements.²²

However, due to socialisation in an oppressive society, narratives about bias and racism can become entrenched and thus failure to acknowledge this leads to lack of progress in cultivating spaces of belonging HCPs from minority backgrounds.²³

Conclusion

The open question is whether the increasing cultural and ethnic diversification of contemporary workforce and societies can lead to the formation of communities of belonging beyond communities of identity.²⁴ Economics remains at the heart of our widening inequality and it is only by focusing on the right policies that we can address it.²⁵ The well-being of healthcare professionals is not a luxury but a necessity. As the rates of burnout and suicides within the healthcare sector continue to rise, it is important for healthcare organisations, policymakers, and managers to prioritise the mental and emotional health of their employees. It is imperative that organisations recognise that combining a place-belonging and a politics of belonging, defines an intimate feeling which is framed by intersecting social forces that serve to include and exclude various social realities. By fostering a sense of belonging and addressing the root causes of burnout, we can create a healthcare workforce that is healthier, happier, and better equipped to provide quality care to patients. This is important for the sustainability and effectiveness of healthcare systems worldwide, as the well-being of the workforce has implications for patient safety and care on many levels.

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