PHYSICIAN BURNOUT: WE NEED TO TREAT THE CAUSE NOT THE SYMPTOMS

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This editorial may be cited as: Tahmeedullah. Physician burnout: We need to treat the cause not the symptoms. J Postgrad Med Inst 2019; 33(1): 1-2.

While medicine is to be your vocation or calling, see to it that you have also an avocation....Some intellectual pastime which may serve to keep you in touch with the world of art, of science or of letters. ” (Sir William Osler)

A few years ago we were not very familiar with the terms like physician’s burnout, work related quality of life and depression but in the last few years these terms have been increasingly recognized and published. Therefore, I selected this topic to highlight the problem of physician’s burnout which we are facing as medical community in Pakistan.

In literature we have a number of definitions of physician’s burnout but the one I found enticing was that burnout is a prolonged and persistent stress reaction which is composed of a constellation of psychological symptoms of depersonalization, emotional instability, loss of personal identity and reduced personal efficacy. It is observed that physicians who are going through burnout typically exhibit anger, irritability, low self-esteem and decreased productivity. The other associated symptoms include progressive worsening of relations with patients, family members and colleagues. The most dreadful manifestation of physician burnout is suicide. The incidence of suicide is highest among the physicians and it is about 1.87 times more frequent in the health care professionals than the other members of the society. As physicians we face stressful situations more frequently due to our profession because we are dealing with the most precious thing in anyone’s life and that is their health. In our practice we don’t have any chance of error or negligence. The health care professionals are going through the agonies and pains of their patients.

Initially when I was going through a few landmark research papers on the subject, I thought that burnout and depression are work related problems of practicing physicians and busy faculty members but later on a number of articles revealed that burnout, depression and low self-esteem are also common symptoms among medical students and residents. A thorough literature review showed that the prevalence of depression or depression associated symptoms among medical students is about 27% and suicide ideation is about 11%. Work related fatigue was observed in 27% postgraduate residents. The Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA) conducted a study in which they followed the residents for 6 years and found 45% of them were having symptoms of burnout and 14% were not happy with their choice of profession.

Physician burnout has not only a negative impact on individual professional growth and career satisfaction but it also has an enormous impact on our overall health care system. A study was conducted among the physicians in 2016 to find out the work related quality of life and job satisfaction. This US study revealed that 13.5% physicians were not satisfied with their job and they were planning to change their job within 1 to 3 years. Most of them were interested in non-clinical job in the health care system. This exit of physicians will be a major contributor to the short fall of physicians and the health economists are expecting a further rise in this trend to the year 2030.

We all know that physician burnout is increasing in our society and damaging our medical students, residents, faculty and our institutions and overall health care system but unfortunately this topic is still a taboo. Best performance of any member of a society depends on physical, emotional and spiritual energies. So the best performance and life of physicians also depends on their ability to manage these energy levels. All skills of our physicians like their leadership skills, empathy, professional skills and the skills as spouse and parent all depends on a positive energy balance. Unfortunately our physicians and residents are not trained to notice or care for their energy levels due to their professional workload, economic burden to maintain their life stan-
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It is tragic when a man outlives his body”, said Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) on his deathbed. There is no doubt: our body fails before our minds are satisfied with life. As time passes, minds become mature, but bodies worn out.

REFERENCES


