

The resident's role in combating burnout among medical students

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Burnout among health care professionals has been increasingly recognized by the medical community over the past several years. The concern for burnout among medical students is equally serious. In this article, I review the prevalence of burnout among medical students, and the personal and clinical effects they experience. I also discuss how as psychiatry residents we can be more effective in preventing and identifying medical student burnout.

An underappreciated problem

Burnout has been defined as long-term unresolvable job stress that leads to exhaustion and feeling overwhelmed, cynical, and detached from work, and lacking a sense of personal accomplishment. It can lead to depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation—one survey found that 5.8% of medical students had experienced suicidal ideation at some point in the previous 12 months.¹ Burnout affects not only the individual, but also his/her team and patients. One study found that compared to medical students who didn't report burnout, medical students who did had lower scores on measures of empathy and professionalism.²

While burnout among physicians and residents has received increasing attention, it often may go unrecognized and unreported in medical students. A literature review that included 51 studies found 28% to 45% of medical students report burnout.³ In a survey at one institution, 60% of medical students reported burnout.⁴ It is evident that

medical schools have an important role in helping to minimize burnout rates in their students, and many schools are working toward this goal. However, what happens when students leave the classroom setting for clinical rotations?

A recent study found burnout among medical students peaks during the third year of medical school.⁵ This is when students are on their clinical rotations, new to the hospital environment, and without the inherent structure and support of being at school.

How residents can help

Like most medical students, while on my clinical rotations, I spent most of my day with residents, and I believe residents can help to both recognize burnout in medical students and prevent it.

The first step in addressing this problem is to understand why it occurs. A survey of medical students showed that inadequate sleep and decreased exercise play a significant role in burnout rates.⁶ Another study found a correlation between burnout and feeling emotionally exhausted and a decreased perceived quality of life.⁷ A medical student I recently worked with stated,



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"How can you not feel burnt out? Juggling work hours, studying, debt, health, and trying to have a life... something always gets dropped."

So as residents, what can we do to identify and assist medical students who are experiencing burnout, or are at risk of getting there? When needed, we can utilize our psychiatry training to assess our students for depression and substance use disorders, and connect them with appropriate resources. When identifying a medical student with burnout, I believe it can become necessary to notify the attending, the site director responsible for the student, and often the school, so that the student has access to all available resources.

It's as important to be proactive as it is to be reactive. Engaging in regular check-ins with our students about self-care and workload, as well as asking about how they are feeling, can offer them opportunities to talk about issues that they might not be getting anywhere else. One medical student I worked with told me, "It's easy to fade into the background as the student, or to feel like I can't complain because this is just how medical school is supposed to be." We have

the ability to change this notion with each student we work with.

It is likely that as residents we have worked with a student struggling with burnout without even realizing it. I believe we can play an important role in helping to prevent burnout by identifying at-risk students, offering assistance, and encouraging them to seek professional help. Someone's life may depend on it.

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Clinical Point

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