Is our profession in need of occupational therapy?

As a former physiotherapist and occupational therapist, I noticed that becoming a foundation year 1 doctor in 2013 profoundly affected my work–life balance. Data published in 2010 suggests that 23% of doctors did not apply to continue training following their second foundation year.1 Similarly, an emergency medicine recruitment and retention crisis was more recently highlighted. People leaving the profession may be sensitive to something the rest of us ignore. When I was a medical student, foundation year doctors told me that they routinely worked unpaid hours and the European Working Time Directive was a fictitious paper exercise for them.

As long as we work unhealthy hours and voluntarily plug NHS gaps, the government can deny its onus to increase NHS staffing. The situation used to be worse, so some doctors may see unhealthy working hours as a rite of passage. I have heard well-established doctors suggest that a correlation between weekend on-calls and staff sickness is evidence of skiving, and that people who drop out of training lack the necessary spine. Inadequate occupational health service provision for GPs may reflect similar expectations from higher management, that doctors should simply be tough.

Perhaps the work ethic ingrained in our professional subculture reflects a lack of awareness of relationships between psychosocial stress and physical illness. I have chosen to continue my medical career because I am enjoying it, in the same way some patients with COPD may enjoy smoking or some obese patients may enjoy unhealthy food, but as a former occupational therapist I am aware of the damage my dedication is doing to my family and social life. Some of the people sensibly leaving our profession may be the very people we need to retain to help us develop a healthy work ethic. If we are unwilling to learn from them, perhaps we can learn from our occupational therapy colleagues, or older, wiser patients who say ‘I wish I hadn’t worked so hard.’

Venthan Jeyaratnam Mailoo,
Foundation Year 1 Doctor, Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital, Norwich.

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ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Venthan Jeyaratnam Mailoo
Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital, Colney Lane, Norwich NR4 7UY.
E-mail: VenthanMailoo@gmail.com

REFERENCES


