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Psychological wellbeing of medical interns in Hong Kong:

What causes them stress and what helps them

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BACKGROUND

Many doctors experience psychological ill health. Interns are known to be particularly vulnerable.

OBJECTIVES

To examine the level of depression, anxiety and stress in interns in Hong Kong, as well as the causes and how they cope.

METHODS

A questionnaire was designed based on themes identified in three focus groups of medical graduates of Year 2004 of the University of Hong Kong. The 21-item Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS 21) was also administered. All 155 graduates of the same year were invited to participate with a response rate of 63%.

RESULTS

Percentages of respondents with abnormal levels of depression, anxiety and stress were 35.8%, 35.4% and 29.2% respectively (Table 1).

Frequent calls during night shift, long working hours and heavy workload constituted the most significant stressors (Table 2).

Factor analysis of the stressors showed that seven factors could explain 68% of the total variance: multidisciplinary team working issues, clinical difficulties, job-seeking and employment, workload issues, ethical and interpersonal issues, adjustment to job rotation and performance appraisal.

Holidays, peers and sleep offered the most significant relief (Table 3).

Table 1 Severity distribution of DASS scores (percentage, number)

Subscale	Normal	Mild	Moderate	Severe	Extremely Severe
Depression	50.5 (48)	13.7 (13)	24.2 (23)	7.4 (7)	4.2 (4)
Anxiety	57.3 (55)	7.3 (7)	21.9 (21)	7.3 (7)	6.3 (6)
Stress	54.2 (52)	16.7 (16)	17.7 (17)	6.3 (6)	5.2 (5)

Table 2 Frequency of items being reported as significant or very significant in causing stress

	%
Frequent call during night shift	95.9
Long working hour	92.8
Heavy workload	90.7
Keen competition for job	89.7
Uncertainty in securing a satisfactory job	88.7
Making clinical errors	79.4
Lack of openness and transparency in recruitment system	76.3
Heavy responsibility	74.0
Performance assessment by supervisor/mentor	73.2
Incompetence in managing clinical problem	72.2
Poor attitude of some colleagues e.g. nurse, senior doctor	73.2
Demanding supervisor	64.9
Lack of mechanism to express opinion without fearing for adverse consequence	64.9
Unfamiliar task/procedure	60.8
Lack of training	59.8
Lack of recognition of your effort from others	59.8
Having to adapt to different policies at different workplaces	57.7
Inadequacy of back-up by other staff	55.7
Unequal sharing of duty among interns	52.6
Patient and/or relative's unreasonable request/compliant	52.6
Lack of sense of belonging to a team	44.3
Tension with other staff	42.3
Frequent specialties rotation	36.1
Having to handle life/death situation	36.1
Asking for senior's advice	35.1
Self-initiated clinical attachment during vacation	32.0

Table 3 Stress-relieving methods reported as significant or very significant

	N	%
	96	99.0
Peer (in medical field)	94	96.9
Sleep	93	95.9
Hobby (e.g. shopping, music listening, TV/film watching, video games)	86	88.7
Family support	81	83.5
Friend (outside medical field)	72	74.2
Exercise	35	36.1
Religion	35	36.1
Senior medical colleague	27	27.8
Others	7	7.2
Alcohol	5	5.2
Psychologist/counsellor	2	2.1
Your own doctor	2	2.1
Smoking	1	1.0
Help-seeking hotline	0	0.0
Soft drug	0	0.0

CONCLUSION

Interns experience considerable depression, anxiety and stress. The source of stress is multi-faceted, but workload is the most significant stressor. Peer support groups may relief stress.

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