

CARING FOR THE CARER – AVOIDING BURNOUT IN GENERAL PRACTICE

Suzanne Creed of Medisec provides practical strategies for building personal resilience and reducing your risk of burnout

Healthcare professionals are increasingly exposed to workplace stressors that can affect their wellbeing, performance and patient care. Burnout has become a growing concern across healthcare systems in Ireland and internationally.¹ The work carried out by GPs and their teams is in a complex, non-linear, unpredictable environment. This, coupled with rising patient demand, longer hours, staff shortages,² and often limited resources greatly increases the risk of burnout.

Burnout extends far beyond individual wellbeing. It is a significant professional and organisational risk, implicating clinician health, patient safety, team performance and workforce sustainability.

Understanding burnout

Burnout is a work-related syndrome arising from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. The Maslach Burnout Inventory evaluates burnout across emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation (a sense of detachment or cynicism towards patients) and personal accomplishment.³

The World Health Organization (WHO) describes burnout as an occupational phenomenon and has included it in the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), clearly stating that it is not a medical condition.⁴

While it is not classified as a medical condition, burnout has significant implications for healthcare delivery. It is essential to distinguish between burnout and depression, as each has distinct diagnostic criteria and necessitates different treatment approaches. Burnout is primarily linked to chronic occupational stress and often improves when workplace stressors are addressed and adequate recovery time is provided, while depression is a broader condition that remains unaffected by changes in work circumstances.

The scale of burnout in Irish healthcare

General practice forms the cornerstone of the Irish healthcare system, providing comprehensive, continuous and patient-centred care. However, GPs have faced substantial challenges in recent years.

Population growth, an ageing population, increasing multimorbidity, mental health presentations, and the expansion of community-based care have increased workload considerably.⁵ At the same time, recruitment and retention challenges persist, particularly in rural and remote areas.⁵

Research conducted by O’Dea et al reported high levels of emotional exhaustion and work-related stress among Irish GPs, with many citing workload, administrative demands and concerns regarding work-life balance as key contributors.⁶

Findings from the 2024 Practitioner Health Matters Programme report revealed that new presentations rose by 48% from 2018 to 2023.⁷ Presentations included; burnout, stress and anxiety, highlighting the intensifying demands placed on healthcare professionals.

The Covid-19 pandemic further intensified these pressures. General practice teams were required to rapidly adapt to changing infection control measures, vaccination programmes, telemedicine implementation and management of deferred care.⁸ Studies conducted during and after the pandemic demonstrated increased levels of psychological distress and burnout among healthcare professionals across Ireland.⁹

Risk factors for burnout

Burnout among healthcare professionals is multifactorial, driven by a combination of organisational, occupational and individual factors. Predisposing factors include:

- **High workload demands:** GPs are faced with managing growing

patient population, multimorbidity, polypharmacy often within the context of workforce shortages and a lack of available appointments. High consultation volumes and longer working hours, often without adequate opportunities for meals or rest can result in chronic fatigue, emotional distress and a heightened risk of burnout

- **Emotional demands of patient care:** GPs frequently support patients through a wide range of physical, psychological and social challenges. Regular exposure to illness, distress, bereavement, mental health crises and difficult clinical decisions can be emotionally taxing, leading to emotional exhaustion and compassion fatigue over time
- **Work-life balance challenges:** The demands of general practice often extend beyond scheduled clinic hours, with many GPs dedicating additional time to administrative work, clinical correspondence, out-of-hours commitments and practice management responsibilities. This encroachment on personal and family time can create difficulties in maintaining a healthy work-life balance and negatively impact overall wellbeing
- **Administrative burden:** The growing demand to meet regulatory and contractual requirements along with managing patient records, repeat prescriptions, test results, telephone call and patient correspondence all create additional workload for GPs. These non-clinical responsibilities can reduce the time available for direct patient care and contribute to frustration and job dissatisfaction
- **System and resource constraints:** Inadequate access to healthcare resources, long waiting lists for secondary care services and difficulties accessing community supports can place additional pressures on GPs. Furthermore, insufficient opportunities

for peer support, protected time for professional development and access to wellbeing services may contribute to feelings of professional isolation and burnout.

Continuous exposure of these risk factors over time without adequate support or intervention can diminish professional satisfaction, reduce resilience and erode a GP's sense of personal accomplishment increasing the risk of burnout.

Identifying the warning signs

Common features associated with work related stress and burnout include:

- Ongoing fatigue – feeling physically and emotionally drained most of the time
- Feelings of helplessness, unable to cope with ongoing demand
- Sense of detachment, isolation or disconnection from others
- Feelings of cynicism or negative attitude towards work activities which were once meaningful or enjoyable
- Self-doubt and diminished confidence in areas of previous competence
- Struggling with decision-making, or taking longer than usual to complete tasks
- Finding it difficult to maintain emotional control, focus or effective self-regulation.

Early recognition and intervention are essential in addressing burnout. If you believe you may be affected, you should seek support early from your line manager and consult your own GP or another qualified healthcare professional.

It is also important to be aware of your professional responsibilities as outlined by the Irish Medical Council,¹⁰ It states: "You should:

- Look after your own health and wellbeing. This is in your own interest but also supports you to sustain safe and effective medical practice
- Have your own GP. This should not be a person with whom you have a close family or personal relationship.

The Council also provides specific guidance regarding concerns about wellbeing.¹⁰ It states:

"If health and wellbeing risks arise for you from your work, you should raise these concerns with an appropriate person or authority, such as your employer. If you have concerns about your health, you should consider seeking guidance and support from colleagues and /or family and friends, or support services provided by a professional body or organisation."



Personal and professional impact of burnout

Burnout can have far-reaching effects on healthcare professionals, adversely impacting their physical and psychological wellbeing, professional performance and the quality and safety of patient care.

A recent study in the *BMJ* identified that doctors with burnout are twice as likely to be involved in patient safety incidents.¹¹ Similarly, research by Panagioti et al demonstrated associations between clinician burnout and increased medical errors, reduced patient satisfaction and poorer quality of care.¹²

As a result, healthcare organisations are more likely to experience reduced productivity, increased staff turnover and reduced workforce morale when burnout becomes widespread. These effects create a cycle whereby staffing shortages further increase pressure on remaining staff.

Risk management strategies

Bohman et al¹³ describe physician wellbeing in three interrelated components; practice efficiency, a culture of wellness and personal resilience. Strategies aimed at preventing, reducing or reversing burnout should address all three domains.

Enhance practice efficiency

Review work processes regularly

to identify opportunities for greater efficiency. Simple measures such as ensuring clinical rooms are adequately stocked before clinics commence can help minimise delays and disruptions during busy periods. Consider which tasks may be safely delegated to other members of the healthcare team and be mindful of unnecessary interruptions, which can impair concentration, reduce productivity and increase the risk of errors.

Reduce administrative burden

Streamlining processes, optimising the use of technology, and automating routine tasks where possible can help reduce this burden. Appropriate delegation of non-clinical duties to administrative and support staff may also free up valuable time for direct patient care.

Embed a positive workplace culture

A supportive work environment with open communication, teamwork, mutual respect, and constructive feedback can promote staff engagement and well-being. Recognising achievements, celebrating successes, and providing opportunities for professional development and career progression can enhance job satisfaction, strengthen morale, and reduce burnout risk. Fostering a 'just culture', in particular when reviewing adverse events or complaints, will ensure staff feel supported throughout the process.

Know what support services are available

Accessing available support systems is an important component of maintaining wellbeing. Mental health services, counselling programmes, peer support networks and mentorship opportunities can provide valuable assistance during periods of stress and help foster professional resilience.

Prioritise self-care and build personal resilience

Maintaining physical and psychological health is essential in reducing vulnerability to burnout. Prioritise adequate sleep, regular rest breaks, healthy nutrition and physical activity. Limiting alcohol consumption, particularly when used as a coping mechanism, is also important. Small, sustainable self-care practices can have a significant cumulative impact on wellbeing.

Maintain safe and sustainable workloads

Set professional boundaries and maintain workloads that are safe for both clinicians and patients. Avoid unrealistic

expectations and excessive perfectionism. Seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness. When unwell, take appropriate time off and seek medical advice from your own GP or healthcare professional. Regular breaks from clinical duties and having interests outside work can support recovery and resilience.

Stay connected

Strong personal and professional relationships protect against burnout. Make time for family, friends, hobbies and activities unrelated to medicine. Even brief periods of recovery, such as taking a walk, pursuing a hobby or engaging in social interactions, can help replenish emotional reserves.

Know when to seek help

Early recognition and intervention are crucial. If you are experiencing symptoms of burnout, anxiety or depression, seek appropriate support and professional advice. Confidential resources are available to doctors through a number of programmes (see below).

Conclusion

Burnout is a significant challenge in all healthcare settings. Addressing

burnout requires a comprehensive risk management approach that combines organisational reform, workforce planning, supportive leadership, and individual wellbeing initiatives. By recognising burnout as both an occupational health issue and a clinical governance concern, healthcare organisations can implement strategies that protect practitioners while enhancing outcomes for patients.

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Resources

- Irish College of GPs Health in Practice Programme. www.irishcollegeofGPs.ie – under Doctors’ Healthcare Support
- HSE Employee Assistance Programme. www.hse.ie
- Medical Council CAREHub. www.medicalcouncil.ie under Public Information
- Practitioner Health Programme. www.practitionerhealth.ie

References available on request

PCS
PRIMARY CARE SURGICAL ASSOCIATION

15th Annual Scientific Meeting

Friday, October 2nd 2026 - Radisson Blu, Athlone

Time	Topic	Speaker
09.00 - 09.30	Registration and Chairperson's Welcome	
09.30 - 10.15	AI and Community Surgery	Dr Darren McCormack
10.15 - 11.00	Cryosurgery	Dr David Buckley
11.00 - 11.30	Tea, Coffee & Meet the Sponsors	
11.30 - 12.15	Ross Ardill Prize	Finalists
12.15 - 13.00	Keynote: General practice leading out on skin services - Dr Sylvia McKenna, GP with subspecialty interest, Dundalk	
13.00 - 14.00	Lunch & Meet the Sponsors	
14.00 - 15.15	Basic Session 1 <i>Hands-on Workshop</i> IGTN	Advanced Session 1 Approaching Scalp Lesions
15.15 - 15.45	Tea, Coffee & Meet the Sponsors	
15.45 - 17.00	Basic Session 2 <i>Hands-on Workshop</i> Ellipse and Closure	Advanced Session 2 Grafts

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