



Your money or your life

Dr Roger Lai
Occupational Medicine Physician

Q: What is the difference between a poor and rich orthopaedic surgeon?

A: Six months

While doctors have tremendous human capital, we are not immune to financial stress from the vicissitudes of life. Almost a third of doctors in private practice reported feeling very or moderately financially stressed in May 2020 due to COVID-19 related fall in income.

More broadly, alongside work and relationships, financial concerns are a common factor in poor mental health.

In the 2021 Medscape Burnout & Suicide Report, 45 per cent of doctors identified **increased compensation to avoid financial stress** as the factor that would help most to reduce burnout.

Different financial concerns affect doctors through their careers. Anecdotally:

The medical student juggling work and studies.

The junior doctor working extra overtime shifts and locums at personal and functional cost.

A burnt-out doctor continuing in a joyless job due to the 'golden handcuffs' of high wage, mortgage and private school fees.

A senior colleague working well past desired retirement age.

Doctors are also not immune to the wealth-destroying effects of a relationship breakdown, failed investments and scams.

The stigma of seeking help for financial distress can be greater than that for mental health.

Good financial health can provide you with work flexibility, life-enhancing experiences and peace of mind.

The following financial health checklist may prompt you to consider whether you have the foundations in place for financial health.

1 I am investing in myself

My most important financial asset is my ability to earn income. This means investing in my wellbeing and skills for a long enjoyable and fruitful career.

2 I am investing in my relationships

Divorce is very expensive.

3 I have a written financial plan

This outlines my life values and how I can meet my short, medium, and long-term goals with those values in mind.

4 If I cannot work tomorrow, I can still pay my mortgage and bills

I can access emergency savings (around six weeks of expenses). I have a good-quality income and disability protection policy. I have good-quality private health insurance.

5 I have a margin of safety and protection

I can comfortably service my debts. I regularly review my insurances (medical indemnity, house, car, business etc).

6 I am aware of the 'hedonic treadmill' and 'status anxiety'

I spend more on what really matters to me. Mindful spending on quality experiences often has better 'bang for buck' than retail therapy or living in an expensive postcode.

7 I have an automated savings and retirement plan

I regularly invest, take advantage of government tax incentives such as superannuation, and I know how much I need to retire comfortably.

8 I have an up-to-date will

This will remove any doubts or difficulties about my wishes.

9 I know that if it sounds too good to be true, it is probably a scam

Doctors are a favoured target of dubious 'investment' scheme promoters.

There are many books, guides, and services including AMA Financial Services that can assist. For those already in financial difficulty, the National Debt Helpline is a government-funded, non-profit financial counselling service: ndh.org.au;

1800 007 007. ■

Dr Roger Lai is a committee member of the Doctors Health Advisory Service WA. www.dhaswa.com.au