



Effective strategies for creating a healthy workplace

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Medical workplaces don't just have sick patients. The workplaces themselves can create burnout and sickness in their doctors. The 10th Australasian Doctors Health Conference that was held in Fremantle in November 2019 explored the theme of "creating a healthy workplace".

The international keynote speaker for the conference was Dr Jane Lemaire, Clinical Professor of Internal Medicine and Director of Wellness at the University of Calgary. She is widely regarded as being the leader in physician wellness in Canada and one of the leading experts in the world. She has undertaken extensive research over the past 10 years investigating the causes, effect and management of doctors' poor wellbeing.

In one of Dr Lemaire's main research projects, a group of social researchers (who analysed workplaces for a living) followed teams of doctors for a week as they did their daily work in a major hospital. After analysing the results, they concluded that hospital

workplaces were chaotic.

They identified three sets of factors causing the chaos. First was the nature of the work itself – a high and complex workload, continual interruptions and delays in work flow, and intense emotional, physical and intellectual demands on staff. Second was the workplace environment – hospitals were a large space with virtual borders, a lack of quiet, private areas for doctors, inefficient technology, inadequate resourcing, and gaps in roles and responsibilities. Third were factors within the individual clinical teams with diverse membership, differing levels of skills and experience, and differing levels of interpersonal and team work skills.

The researchers then looked at which doctors seemed to manage best in this chaotic environment and identified three important skills.

First was what they called "Conduct" skills – being able to negotiate the chaotic environment in which they worked. This required being adaptable and flexible, able to juggle different responsibilities and roles, able to

balance efficiency and professionalism, and able to deal with distractions and interruptions.

Second, doctors who coped best had good interpersonal skills. They showed empathy, respect and a sincere interest in

their patients. They related well to members of their team and junior doctors or students they were supervising. They found their work to be intellectually stimulating, and enjoyed teaching.

Third, doctors who coped best displayed good wellness behaviours. They looked after their own physical and mental health, used humour to diffuse stress, provided and received collegial support, and promoted wellness to others. Little things like not being hungry, and making time to go to the bathroom were important.

Lastly the researchers looked at what specific coping strategies were most helpful at times of extreme stress when doctors were feeling overwhelmed. The most effective strategies were simple but powerful – taking a time out (going to a quiet place for a few minutes); debriefing or having a laugh and smile with colleagues, friends and family; and taking time away from work.

The take home message was that medical workplaces, and hospitals in particular, are by nature chaotic. This will not change, and will probably get worse as health systems become more complex over time. So instead of fighting it, or just complaining about it, have a think about how you can adapt and change your behaviour so that you and those around you can best find professional and personal fulfilment at work.

For further information on doctor's health issues, check out

www.dhaswa.com.au ■



Pioneering: Dr Jane Lemaire is widely regarded as being one of the world's leading experts in physician wellness.