



Neurodiversity in doctors

The impact of neurodiversity on our health system

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It's well known that medical school selects for certain personality traits: ambitious, type A, meticulous people. These candidates are goal-driven, detail-oriented and, in the words of Hermione Granger, "highly logical to look past extraneous detail and perceive clearly that which others overlook".

Neurodiversity is directly correlated with high intelligence and the personality traits detailed above.¹ Though the research is sparse, it is not a giant leap to postulate that there is a higher proportion of neurodiversity amongst doctors. Stigma for doctors with mental health is high, and it is possible this stigma may partially account for the sparsity in research.²

Our knowledge of what constitutes neurodiversity continues to grow. Where we previously thought of conditions including Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorders (ADHD) as black-and-white diagnoses with strong stereotypes, we are

now learning that neurodiverse traits sit on a spectrum.

In fact, spectrum is almost becoming an outdated term, misleading in that it implies linearity. More and more, we are being encouraged to think of neurodiversity traits in circular fashion, with different traits or 'circles' that intersect with each other:³

Some traits that correlate to autism in neurodiversity may include:

- high sensitivity and emotional intensity;
- requiring more significant effort to regulate emotions;
- hypersensitivity to sensory input;
- attachment to routines; and
- masking and increased burnout.^{4, 5, 6}

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Some traits that correlate to ADHD in neurodiversity may include:

- constantly task-switching;
- concentration fluctuating in and out of conversations;
- memory difficulties;
- ability to hyperfocus;
- low inhibition, high impulsivity;
- frequently understimulated, feelings of boredom; and
- high sensitivity to sounds.^{7, 8, 9}

Sound familiar? These traits are anecdotally common in medicine and doctors. It is an unproven hypothesis thus far, but a fair one.

So, if there is higher neurodiversity in doctors, and higher rates of mental health and burnout amongst doctors, might we examine how working in health systems may contribute to increased burnout in doctors with neurodiverse traits?

Interrupting phone calls, pagers repeatedly beeping, yelling patients, staff muttering inaudible plans that need to be urgently documented – this is an overwhelming environment for any person. But it may be exacerbated in people with neurodiverse traits.

Here are a few examples of this:

- Being stretched to the point of being unable to perform a job to the level expected of yourself, is likely personally injurious to those who have perfectionist traits.
- Emotionally-charged consults, a new patient every 15 minutes, and each patient expecting 100% of your attention, is likely fatiguing to a person who struggles with emotional hypersensitivity.
- Being expected to constantly switch tasks, as many loud and interrupting priorities interfere with one another, is likely to be overwhelming to someone who struggles with feeling easily overstimulated.

Doing work that constantly challenges your traits may contribute to the higher rates of mental health and suicide that we consistently see in doctor populations.²

I'm not stating this for sympathy for doctors. There is no "woe is me". It's simply about raising awareness of doctors being humans who tire, fear and suffer burnout like any other person. A medical career is innately difficult, and it's interesting to point out how this may be made even more challenging by the very qualities we select doctors for.

The answer is not to select for doctors without neurodiverse traits, of course. These neurodiverse traits are often our superpowers as well, much like Hermione's logic in her ability to problem-solve.

But perhaps we can use this enhanced knowledge to raise increased awareness of the realities of a medical career; help reduce the stigma towards doctors seeking mental health support; and continue our advocacy efforts for organisational change that supports doctors' mental health, such as flexible training options.

I hope we can extend some kindness to our doctors – those who are dedicating their lives to a career of helping their communities – and an understanding that a medical career is difficult, taxing, and often a sacrifice to mental health.

With much love to those who are struggling. You are never struggling alone. ■

References available on request



Useful contacts

- In an emergency, call **000**.
- In a mental health emergency, you can also call Lifeline: **13 11 14**.
- If you're a doctor in need who wants to speak to a confidential advice line run by other doctors, you can call the Doctors' Health Advisory Service of Western Australia (DHASWA) anytime: **08 9321 3098**.



Useful resources

1. ***The Highly Sensitive Person: How to thrive when the world overwhelms you***
– Elaine N Aron
2. ***Divergent Mind: Thriving in a world that wasn't designed for you***
– Susan Cain
3. ***The World Needs Neurodiversity: Unusual times call for unusual thinking***
– Nancy Doyle (Forbes; March 2020)

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