

Mental health of healthcare professionals

To the Editor: Mental health problems affect one-third of all South Africans,^[1] including the healthcare workforce who have been on the frontline of the COVID-19 response. The mental health of healthcare workers, however, remains overlooked and underprioritised as they find themselves without adequate support.^[2] Medical interns in South Africa (SA) are freshly qualified medical doctors, who after 6 years of medical school have to undergo 2 years of compulsory training before registering as medical professionals with the Health Professional Council of SA. They are often vulnerable owing to their first exposure to an environment with a limited support system.^[3]

We have noted that mental health problems are prevalent among healthcare workers.^[4] Their participation as frontline workers in this pandemic has involved an increase in demand for healthcare services, an overload of work, the risk of infection, the possibility of transmission to their families, deaths of colleagues and relatives, confinement and, in many cases, voluntary isolation, among other circumstances.^[4,5] As a result, health professionals may be exposed to a number of psychological symptoms such as fear, insecurity and anxiety,^[6] compassion fatigue and burnout, involving emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and lack of personal fulfilment at work as a result of continued exposure to job stressors.^[7,8] Medical interns, as young professionals, can be expected to be more vulnerable to mental health conditions, and require additional support (such as regular counselling sessions with psychologists, debriefing at their places of work, sympathy from senior colleagues and other health workers), which could be beneficial to improve their mental health.

There is an urgent need to conduct a formal survey among medical interns to assess the environment that they train in as newly qualified doctors, and how this plays a significant role in shaping their mental health and their ability to navigate through

the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that interns are just starting out their careers, we think it is important to address these issues to improve and safeguard the mental health of interns, for the benefit of both the healthcare workforce and patients alike.

G L Tesema, K Gibbs

Department of Public Health, Steve Biko Academic Hospital, Pretoria, South Africa

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