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Why we . . . escape the wards for a walk

Paediatric registrar Joseph Machta tells **Francesca Robinson** how going for a walk with colleagues during his lunch break helps clear his head and boost his wellbeing

Francesca Robinson

One day, during a lull at work in the paediatric department at Barnet Hospital, Joseph Machta felt the need for some fresh air. So, he persuaded some of his colleagues to go for a walk. The doctors from the neonatal and paediatric teams felt so refreshed by the short break that it has now become a regular event.

"It was a spur of the moment thing; we just put our coats on and walked out of the hospital. I suggested the walk because I suddenly felt I needed to be off the ward and away from the emergency department for a short time," Machta says.

"Barnet is a beautiful area with lots of greenery. The hospital is surrounded by its own car park and has a couple of green areas in the grounds, so we just walked around the site for about 15 minutes and it made us all feel a lot better."

The team now tries to walk every day but sometimes, because of the unpredictability of paediatric emergencies, they only manage to do it once a week. The walk is always confined to the hospital grounds so that the doctors are within reach of the pager system and can answer queries or run back to the ward if needed.

The teams often take the break mid to late afternoon when the wards tend to be quieter. The walk is designed to be a short, sharp respite from work rather than a longer meal break.

"Sometimes there are four or five of us walking, sometimes it's just me and a couple of other people," Machta says. "It's nothing too sophisticated or hugely organised, but it gives us a real psychological break being completely away from the ward. There's something about not being there physically that makes a real difference."

"On days when the sun shines it is particularly restorative," he adds. "It's equally refreshing in winter to be outside in the cold air away from the hot stuffy hospital, especially when you're on a 13 hour shift."

Walking is also a great way of socialising as a team, says Machta, because it is an active process which reduces eye contact and awkward silences. "It enables me to bond with my workmates and get to know them as people rather than just work colleagues," he says. "This then helps us to support each other in work because it makes us sensitive to some of the things people may be going through in their lives. The conversations are different from the ones we have in our lunch breaks. When you take a break in the hospital, you're still switched on to work."

Machta says other medical teams could equally benefit from a walking break. "It's an opportunity for people to slow down a bit and gather themselves during the working day. Everyone will benefit from going outside and getting some fresh air, even if it's only once in a while."

How to organise a walking break

- All it needs is one person with the drive and enthusiasm to suggest a daily walk
- Start the day by verbally mentioning the idea to your team
- Put out a message on your team's WhatsApp group stating when and where to meet up
- Make sure you have the right clothing and footwear for the day's weather
- Stay within the range of the pager system so you can respond to emergencies