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Covid-19: BMA demands better psychological support for trainees

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The government, the NHS, and education bodies must provide better support for trainee doctors to deal with the psychological effects of the covid-19 pandemic, the BMA has said.

Speaking at the BMA's junior doctor conference on 8 May, Sarah Hallett, chair of the association's Junior Doctors Committee, warned that staff wellbeing must be taken more seriously.

A BMA survey in April found that more than 40% of junior doctors (295 of 721) said they were experiencing depression, anxiety, stress, or burnout that had been worsened by the pandemic, while 60% (430 of 722) said their current levels of fatigue or exhaustion were higher than normal.

"Our surveys tell us that thousands of doctors are currently suffering from depression, anxiety, stress, burnout, emotional distress, or other mental health conditions that have been made worse by working life during this pandemic," said Hallett. "And research earlier this year found that nearly half of ICU staff are likely to meet the threshold for PTSD, severe anxiety, or problem drinking during the covid-19 pandemic.

"This is unacceptable in any workplace, let alone in our NHS. Yet, despite the mounting evidence, the torrents of testimony, there is precious little action from the government and our employers. One junior doctor who recently told me of her struggles found her trust only employed one psychologist to help staff like her struggling to cope."

Hallett said that junior doctors had been caught in a perfect storm, often being the first to see patients and having their training and our progression put on hold.

"We must see action from organisations like the NHS, the statutory education bodies, and the government to step up and work with us to put in place real, practical support to deal with these issues affecting our morale, our training, and our wellbeing," Hallett said.

She called for initiatives to help junior doctors progress through their training and in the workforce "or we risk losing a generation of doctors, and it is our patients who will feel the consequences of that disaster."

During the pandemic junior doctors have found it near impossible to study, while educational activities have been interrupted and working days have often seemed endless, Hallett said. "In spite of this, we have put our patients first, and we—like the rest of the profession—have done indescribably important work in the most horrific and relentless of circumstances."