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Covid-19: One third of trainees are affected by burnout, GMC survey finds

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The covid-19 pandemic has increased the level of burnout in trainees and risks reversing recent improvements to their workload and wellbeing, the General Medical Council (GMC) has warned.

Of the 46 793 trainees in the UK who completed the annual national survey (a 76% response rate),¹ 33% said that they felt burnt out from work to a high or very high degree, and 43% found their work emotionally exhausting to a high or very high degree.

Questions on burnout were added to the survey in 2018, and this year's results are the worst recorded.

When the survey asked trainees whether they felt worn out at the end of the working day, over 17% said that they always did and 42% said that they often did. Over a third (37%) reported that they "always" or "often" felt exhausted in the morning at the thought of another day at work.

Charlie Massey, GMC chief executive, said that it was not surprising for burnout to have worsened during the pandemic but that trainees could not continue to work at such high levels of intensity.

"As health services emerge from covid-19 pressures will remain, but we must not risk reversing the gains that have been made in recent years," he said. "The danger is that, unless action is taken, workloads and wellbeing will continue to suffer, and future burnout rates could get even worse."

Training opportunities

Trainees were also asked about the impact of the pandemic on their training. Just over a quarter (26%) agreed that they had been given effective alternatives through simulation facilities or simulation exercises to make up for missed training opportunities. Two fifths (41%) of trainees agreed that they had been able to compensate for the loss of training opportunities through transferable skills gained from other aspects of training.

And most trainees (81%) said that they were on course to meet their 2021 curriculum competencies or outcomes for their stage of training.

Massey said, "We know many trainees remain concerned about their training progression, so we are working hard to ensure training is flexible, fair, and helps prepare doctors to meet current and future patient needs."

Responding to the survey's findings, Sarah Hallett, chair of the BMA's Junior Doctors Committee, said that while it was good to see a large proportion of trainees rating the quality of their training highly, it was very worrying that one in 10 junior doctors was concerned about progressing through training.

"We are the consultants, GPs, and specialists of the future, and the highly skilled clinicians that the NHS will rely on for decades to come," she said. "As the health service moves to the next phase of managing the pandemic and working through the huge backlog of care, the wellbeing and training needs of junior doctors must be prioritised."

Martin Marshall, chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners, said that the survey showed the toll that the intense workload created by the pandemic had had on GP trainees and their trainers.

"Our trainees are the future of the profession and the care we are able to deliver to patients in general practice, so we must address these issues," he said.

¹ General Medical Council. National training survey 2021: results. Jul 2021. https://www.gmc-uk.org/-/media/documents/national-training-survey-results-2021--summary-report_pdf-87050829.pdf.