Rammya Mathew: Doctors shouldn’t feel guilty for working “part time”

Rammya Mathew GP

My son started school this September, and I’ve been reflecting on what it’s been like to juggle parenting and my career over the past few years. Life has changed immeasurably since I had children—my ability to ruthlessly pursue my career ambitions came to a halt with the birth of my first child. Since then I’ve been perpetually searching for the right balance between being a “present” mother and a fulfilled doctor.

I’m not alone in this. Last week a survey by the King’s Fund found that two thirds of GP trainees in England were planning to work part time, citing work based pressures as well as the need for some work-life balance and having a sustainable career.¹

I used to be that person who loved work and probably spent an unhealthy amount of time outside working hours pursuing any of several additional projects. Without any real boundaries, I never even considered that one day I’d work less than full time. But when the time came it wasn’t even a question. I knew that work would always be there, but I didn’t want to miss precious time with my young children.

Regardless, on many occasions since making that decision I’ve felt as though I’m just not doing enough professionally and have wanted more challenge and stimulation out of my week. Those feelings haven’t been helped by comments such as, “Oh, but you work only three days a week,” from people who I’m sure are well meaning but who have perhaps forgotten the intensity and physicality of looking after small children all day.

In the past year I’ve increased the amount of work that I do, and I’m now working more or less full time again. I have, however, been very intentional about choosing a portfolio of work that includes elements that can be done flexibly. I’ve also asked to start later or finish earlier on one or two of my clinical and managerial days, so that I can do some of the school pick-ups and drop-offs.

Like many other doctors who work flexibly or choose to work less than full time, I’m trying my best to keep all the plates spinning. I try not to feel guilty or invalidated when I read tabloid articles that continually berate GPs for wasting taxpayers’ money. The reality is that everyone’s lives have more than one dimension: work is a substantial part of that, but all of us are contributing to society in all sorts of wonderful ways—and we shouldn’t feel guilty for doing so.

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