

The Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME) represents national medical associations across Europe. We are committed to contributing the medical profession's point of view to EU and European policy-making through pro-active cooperation on a wide range of health and healthcare related issues.

Policy on Doctors' Well-being: Promoting Work-Life Balance and Supportive Environments

O. Recommendations:

Healthcare institutions should:

- Implement interventions that prioritise enhancing working conditions while ensuring a safe and secure environment at the workplace. Employers must ensure that provisions relating to appropriate working conditions are complied with.
- Implement benchmarks for minimum workforce capacities in healthcare to ensure safe staffing levels. This is only possible with fair financial remuneration.
- Establish confidential, easily accessible mental health services for doctors, including counselling, therapy, and helplines, while also promoting education programmes to reduce stigma and encourage doctors to seek help through clinical leadership involvement.
- Implement family-friendly measures, including flexible working arrangements, adequate parental leave and on-site childcare facilities to assist doctors in their roles as parents and carers.
- Establish mentorship programmes led by experienced colleagues and peer support networks for doctors to offer guidance, build community and provide emotional support.
- Develop tailored well-being programmes for doctors, including mindfulness training, stress management, fitness regimes, and access to healthy food options at work for the diverse workforce.

The EU, national governments and administrations should:

- Ensure effective enforcement of EU directives like the Working Time Directive and Parental Leave Directive, promoting reasonable work schedules with adequate rest breaks and time off.
- Encourage healthcare institutions to cultivate a supportive organisational culture, emphasising autonomy, a peer support network, and a sense of dialogue, trust, and belonging.
- Be responsible for ensuring adequate funding for the medical sector and reducing unnecessary paperwork and administrative workload.

Universities and organisations providing medical education and training should:

- Integrate well-being promotion into medical education curricula to equip future doctors with the skills to support their own well-being.
- Play a crucial role in promoting a culture of well-being among young doctors, especially by highlighting role models within the medical profession who exemplify a healthy work-life balance.

Furthermore, a culture that exclusively measures success in the medical profession based on academic achievement should be discouraged. Individual health and personal well-being should be given due consideration.

1. Introduction

Doctors, as dedicated healthcare professionals, face significant challenges in maintaining their own well-being while caring for others. The demanding nature of their work, long working hours, and high levels of stress can take a toll on their physical and mental health. These challenges are further compounded by workforce shortages and the pursuit of a work-life balance that accommodates family life.

Research has shown that burnout among doctors – a condition that represents the exact opposite of well-being – has been increasing over time, with doctors experiencing lower satisfaction with work-life balance compared to the general working population¹.

Well-being, as defined, refers to the personal feeling of a satisfying, balanced life that allows for good physical and mental health. Within this context, this paper underscores the importance of doctors' well-being, and advocates for a holistic approach that includes regulatory measures, cultural shifts, and personal resilience enhancement.

The medical profession is undergoing a profound transformation, especially when compared to the past practices. Nowadays, doctors are seeking a more balanced work-life equilibrium, a commendable endeavour that stands to benefit both doctors and patients alike. Doctors deserve working conditions that are not only legally compliant but also promote their well-being, because of the significance of addressing doctors' well-being extends beyond their personal lives; it directly influences patient safety and healthcare quality. Research has demonstrated that the burnout experienced by doctors correlates with diminished levels of patient safety, compromised professionalism, and reduced patient satisfaction.²

In a significant milestone, the Declaration of Geneva (World Medical Association), a global medical ethics pledge, was revised in 2017 to include a crucial sentence: "I will attend to my own health, well-being, and abilities in order to provide care of the highest standard." This revision emphasises the connection between a doctor's own well-being and their ability to provide high-quality patient care, highlighting the increasing acknowledgment of doctors' well-being in the medical field.

¹ Shanafelt TD, Hasan O, Dyrbye LN, et al. Changes in burnout and satisfaction with work-life balance in physicians and the general US working population between 2011 and 2014. *Mayo Clin Proc.* 2015;90(12):1600–1613.

² Panagioti M, Panagopoulou E, Bower P, et al. Controlled interventions to reduce burnout in physicians: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA Intern Med.* 2017;177(2):195–205.

To address the evolving needs of doctors, the foremost priority lies in member states diligently overseeing the implementation of existing legislation. Member states must consider the effective application of labour laws at both the national and European levels, including directives like the Working Time Directive and Parental Leave Directive. These directives encompass crucial aspects such as working hours, parental leave, teleworking, and the prevention of workplace violence. CPME proposes that both the European Commission and European social partners take a proactive stance in revisiting and updating these directives to better align with the well-being of doctors.

2. How to improve doctors' well-being?

2.1 Policy action and regulatory enforcement

Adequate staffing levels and workload management

A primary factor contributing to doctors' burnout is the strain caused by workforce shortages. Addressing burnout and improving work-life balance is crucial for doctors' well-being but also patient safety. The European Commission should support governments with establishing benchmarks for minimum workforce capacities, taking into account local demographics and organisational structures. It must be ensured that countries train and make efforts to retain a sufficient number of doctors to be self-sufficient. Priority should be given to ensuring that doctors primarily focus on patient care.

Healthcare institutions should comply with maximum working hours and promote adherence to reasonable schedules to manage workload. This includes ensuring appropriate rest breaks and adequate time off for doctors to recharge and maintain a healthy work-life balance. Encouraging flexible scheduling, predictable working conditions and providing support for shift changes can contribute to better work-life balance, enhancing both doctors' well-being and patient outcomes.

To minimise the administrative burden on doctors, hospitals should employ an adequate workforce to handle administrative tasks.³ Additionally, infrastructure planning should place a high priority on the construction of suitably sized hospitals, while also addressing the pressing

³ The time doctors use for direct patient oriented work has decreased in Norway by a full eight hours a week in hospitals since 2004 as there has been a large increase in the administrative burden placed on doctors. We need targeted investments in health service's infrastructure – and far better utilization of the core competence of health personnel.

need to enhance underperforming IT systems and streamline bureaucratic processes and reporting requirements.

2.2 Organisational culture

Embracing a People-Focused Working Culture

Research indicates that fostering a people-focused working culture is essential for doctors' well-being. Prioritising autonomy, relationships, a sense of belonging, and an environment that values individuals leads to positive outcomes for doctors⁴. Recognising both the challenges and triumphs in a medical career is vital. Organisations should create a culture where doctors and other health care professionals feel understood and valued, instilling confidence and trust among doctors, healthcare professionals and medical students.

Doctors' and Medical Education's Role in Promoting Doctors' Well-being

National Medical Associations play a pivotal role in empowering doctors and medical students to actively engage in initiatives promoting well-being. Similarly, education is crucial in shaping doctors' attitudes towards self-care and help-seeking, thus promoting a healthier and more resilient medical workforce.

Through active collaboration with medical schools and institutions, the integration of these principles into medical curricula and continuing professional development ensures that doctors enter the field equipped with the tools to manage their own well-being while providing the best care to their patients.

Mentoring and Peer Support Networks

Emotional support and guidance are vital for personal resilience. Implementing mentorship programmes led by experienced colleagues and peer support networks can greatly enhance these aspects. Pairing doctors with mentors offers valuable guidance and aids in navigating career challenges, while doctors find exchange with their peers rewarding. Peer support networks foster a sense of community, especially vital for retaining doctors, particularly in rural areas.

⁴ Carrieri, D., Mattick, K., Pearson, M. et al. (2020). [Optimising strategies to address mental ill-health in doctors and medical students: 'Care Under Pressure' realist review and implementation guidance](#). BMC Med, 18(76).

Furthermore, research has demonstrated the positive impact of doctors' leadership in hospitals⁵. A 2017 scoping review by Savage et al. underscores the vital role of doctors in shaping healthcare institutions. Their leadership extends beyond clinical responsibilities, impacting work culture and promoting evidence-based practices, resulting in improved patient care and safety.⁶

Doctors as parents and carers

Doctors face the challenge of balancing their demanding careers with their responsibilities as care givers. The combination of their specialised medical expertise and responsibilities, such as parenting, creates a dynamic that requires support and understanding from healthcare institutions. Implementing family-friendly gender-equal measures such as flexible working time arrangements, adequate parental leave and on-site childcare facilities supports doctors in their dual roles.

We acknowledge the importance of gender equality within the medical profession. This includes enabling women to continue their careers after childbirth. To promote this, we support as a good practice tailored support systems for medical parents during their education and training phases, ensuring they have the resources and guidance for a successful career transition.

2.3 Personal Resilience

Comprehensive Well-being Programmes

Enhancing personal resilience is a shared responsibility. National Medical Associations and employers should actively support individual doctors in developing and strengthening their personal resilience. Introducing well-being programmes tailored to the demands of doctors is a crucial step towards holistic well-being. These programmes should offer interventions that equip doctors with mindfulness skills, effective stress management techniques physical fitness regimes, and access to nourishing food options at work. Such initiatives have demonstrated their potential in reducing burnout and enhancing psychological well-being among healthcare professionals⁷.

⁵ The member inquiry from 2022 by the Swedish Medical Association further emphasises the positive effects of doctors in leadership roles on the experiences of healthcare professionals. Professionals working under physician leaders report greater satisfaction in their ability to provide safe patient care and access adequate Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Moreover, the study indicates that those under physician management are more likely to recommend the workplace to others.

⁶ Savage, M., Mazzocato, P., Savage, C., & Brommels, M. (2017). Physicians' role in the management and leadership of health care – A scoping review. Stockholm: Medical Management Centre, Karolinska Institutet.

⁷ West CP, Dyrbye LN, Erwin PJ, Shanafelt TD. [Interventions to prevent and reduce physician burnout: a systematic review and meta-analysis](#). Lancet 2016; 388:2272–81.

While promoting personal resilience tools and strategies, care must be taken not to solely rely on individual interventions such as physical activity, mindfulness and relaxation techniques. A comprehensive, multi-faceted approach is crucial.

Fostering Mental Health, Addressing Burnout and Reducing Stigma

Studies indicate that especially medical students may increasingly be affected by mental health challenges such as depression, stigma, and even suicidal ideation⁸. To address these concerns, creating a supportive environment and providing accessible mental health resources is paramount. Particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the demand for specialised mental health support for healthcare professionals has grown significantly. Establishing confidential and tailored mental health services, including counselling, therapy, and helplines, is essential. Where doctors are victim of violent aggressions, next to any physical injuries, employers and insurance should regularly consider a potential psychological impact of the aggression. Clear policies and procedures are imperative to ensure that all healthcare professionals can confidently take breaks and request time off when ill.

Furthermore, raising awareness about mental health issues and reducing stigma through educational programmes can encourage doctors to seek help when needed. Addressing burnout and mental health issues, including a possible addiction, requires a holistic approach that includes organisational changes, robust support systems, and individual strategies⁹. Establishing peer support networks and mentorship programmes, led by experienced colleagues, can provide essential emotional support and guidance in the challenges and transitions. The objective should be to rehabilitate doctors and reintegrate them into the workforce when possible.

⁸ Schwenk TL, Davis L, Wimsatt LA. [Depression, stigma, and suicidal ideation in medical students](#). JAMA. 2010;304(11):1181-1190.

⁹ Dyrbye LN, Shanafelt TD, Sinsky CA, et al. [Burnout Among Health Care Professionals: A Call to Explore and Address This Underrecognized Threat to Safe, High-Quality Care](#). NAM Perspectives. Discussion Paper, National Academy of Medicine, Washington, DC. 2017.

3. Legislative and Framework Considerations

- Working Time Directive (2003/88/EC)
- Parental Leave Directive (2010/18/EU)
- Directive on Work–Life Balance (2019/1158)
- Occupational Health and Safety Framework Directive (89/391/EEC)
- Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union
- International Labour Organisation (ILO)
- European Trade Union Council (ETUC)
- [CPME Policy on Health Workforce \(2021\)](#)
- Declaration of Geneva, (WMA)