

Six steps for Thriving in Medicine

By Dr. Margaret Kay

Thriving in medicine is easiest when we maintain our health. A healthy doctor provides better quality care to their patients. Maximising our health helps us focus on our patient's needs and encourages patients to follow our example by engaging in positive health behaviours.

1. It is important for doctors to know where they can get help if they ever feel that things are going badly. In Queensland, doctors and medical students can ring the Old Doctors' Health Programme – 07 3833 4352. This is a free and independent service available 24 hours a day. It is not an emergency service but a GP is On Call to provide support. Sometimes our counsellor will be the first person to respond, esp during the day when the GP is busy. She can often provide the support that is necessary at the time. The GPs who take the calls are experienced and provide this service as volunteers to support their peers. Even if we don't personally need to use this number, there may be a time when we can assist our colleagues by reminding them that help is only a phone call away. Many training programmes and hospitals provide support for their trainees and it is important to know what other supports you have available to you and how you can access these supports and what types of issues these supports can help you with. Trying to work out the complexity of your work environment when you are stressed make navigation of these processes difficult.
2. All doctors should have a GP. I am very aware that when GPs go to a small town, this can be a challenge. However, it is important that all doctors identify who they can access for their personal care and it is equally important that they actually see that doctor and develop a therapeutic relationship with that health provider. Developing that relationship requires the investment of time and energy and therefore it needs to be appropriately prioritised, even if we are feeling well. When we are in a rural environment, we may have a GP in a distant city who we intend to travel to regularly (though infrequently) however it is still important to know who you might see who is closer to home as well. Seeking support from within the practice we are working should be avoided where possible. A GP in a nearby town may be a reasonable option. There are some doctors who have been very concerned about the mandatory reporting laws and doctors have a responsibility to understand this legislation. Misunderstandings about this legislation can create fear and may increase the barriers to seeking health care.
3. Maintaining our health is our personal responsibility and also our professional responsibility. Part of the Code of Conduct for Medical Practitioners (Good Medical Practice) clearly outlines that it is a doctor's responsibility to maintain their health. The rationale is that doctors perform their best when they maintain their health and this benefits their patients, and also patients are more likely to be active in their health maintenance behaviours if their doctors are demonstrably doing this too. There are many different approaches to defining the various dimensions of wellbeing. For doctors, I have found it most useful to describe *seven dimensions* of wellbeing:

- a. **Physical health** – this includes the multiple areas of nutrition, sleep, exercise, avoiding harmful habits (substance use)
- b. **Mental health** – this includes maintaining our intellectual and psychological and emotional health. Being able to reflect carefully on our mental health and reflecting the advice we get upon our key supports (e.g. family and friends). Often those we love know that we are ‘not ourselves’ but it is very easy for a doctor to be dismissive when we are told we are ‘working too hard’ or ‘not ourselves lately’. Fatigue can have an impact on our mental health as can other physical health issues. Maintaining our physical health can improve our mental health. Taking time out for reflection to help nourish ourselves is important. Different people need different things to improve our day at work and at home. Working out what we personally need and enabling these things is important – it might be a few minutes being outside at lunch time, listening to some music before we head home. Clearly understanding the role of meditation, mindfulness etc. are supportive techniques to help us manage our mental health. Identifying an approach that works for us when we are busy is important so that maintaining our mental health is integrated into our medical practice.
- c. **Social health** – there is a breadth of literature highlighting our need for connectedness to enable our health, yet in medicine our journey can feel very lonely, even in urban practices. This can be exacerbated by the tyranny of distance and dislocation from our usual hobbies and sports that can increase our isolation. Actively addressing our social health broadens our perspective on life and improved the quality of medicine we deliver with a deeper understanding of the patient’s perspectives and better communication skills. Our social health is also supported through a breadth of reading including many of the classic texts and writings, well beyond the medical texts we study.
- d. **Spiritual health** – whatever someone’s spiritual beliefs are, it is important that doctors are aware of the existential issues they will be faced with throughout their daily work and be prepared to identify times when such issues can result in moral distress. It is essential that doctors have strategies to manage such occasions and seek support.
- e. **Workplace health** – every employee has a right to a safe workplace and this includes ensuring our workplace supports our mental and physical health. All doctors should be aware of what their rights are and how they can seek advice about these issues if they find themselves in a difficult situation. Sometimes this advice can be gathered from medicolegal services, employment services, training services. The supports can come from formal HR services in hospital and health services, or from professional bodies such as the AMA. It is important for doctors to consider what organisations they do and could belong to so that they are aware of their rights and their pathways to support well before they encounter problems. Seeking advice early can avoid a situation descending into an irretrievable one that can result in career interruption.
- f. **Financial health** – as a doctor begins in their career in medicine, it is important to take time to get advice on how to best manage their finances and this requires spending an appropriate amount of time getting the right advice, deciding what we are comfortable when it comes to financial investments and insurance (including personal income protection insurance) and educating ourselves about the options. As we build up our assets we need to ensure they are adequately protected as we gather our assets, rather than find we need to pay extra stamp duty transferring our assets later.

- g. **Medicolegal health** – there is good evidence that we reduce our chance of being sued if we maintain our engagement with our peers through medical education activities and keeping good notes. Ensuring we make time to reflect upon our work is also important. Maintaining our cover and knowing our pathways to our medicolegal supports can be very helpful. Medical indemnity providers often provide services for mental health support for the practitioner as well as legal support. Being prepared to engage with the medicolegal team early for advice, rather than just when a more serious problem is unfolding is also important.
4. Having a mentor can add a positive element to our professional life. Establishing this practice of seeking a mentor early in our career is important. Over time, it is likely that you will develop a strong network of supports with different mentors with different strengths. A mentor is not your current active supervisor, but someone you can seek independent advice from, especially when something is troubling you. A mentor is not necessarily medical, but clearly it needs to be someone who can manage a conversation that is supportive when we are talking about medical issues. All discussions about patients need to be deidentified, but we should develop the skills to seek the advice we need without providing a person with all the key details needed to identify a person. A mentor should be accessible for advice and does not need to be in the same town/city.
5. Preparing for our practice in medicine will enable us to thrive. There has been a lot of negative talk about medicine and the stress of the work, but the reality is that medicine remains an amazing and flexible profession that offers so much for the practitioner. Doctors are more likely to enjoy their work if they engage with the learning so that they are confident practitioners. (It is not just about passing exams but being good at our work.) The craft of medicine involves praxis and knowledge (combining both academic learning with our practical skills). Understanding why we did medicine, our expectations of medicine and how these were formed is vital if we are to develop the positive strategies it takes to practice medicine. Having and maintaining a well-articulated vision of our role as a doctor can help us identify the times when we need to be focused, and when we need to be flexible, with our career decisions. Medicine is a career that opens many doors.
6. All doctors should develop better skills for caring for doctors. This is especially true for GP registrars as doctors are all being asked to get a GP and one day it is possible, even likely, that they will be the GP for a doctor. Understanding how to improve our delivery of care to other members of our profession so that we deliver patient-centred empathic care requires a deep understanding of what it means to be a patient, recognising the barriers that doctors experience when accessing care and avoiding the common traps such as attribution bias and assumptions that can affect our delivery of quality care.