Response to letter to the editor

Student response to burnout in medical students

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A letter to the Editor by a medical student mentioned that to include the assessment of psychopathology would be helpful to better understand the aetiology of burnout. In addition, it was argued, that this might be a main limitation of our study.

As described in the introduction of our paper [1], the aim was not to describe specific psychopathologic traits of students, but answering the question, whether studying medicine is comparable to the understanding of a work environment and consequently, is the use of the model provided by Maslach and Leiter [2, 3] also valid for medical students.

Using the Maslach Burnout Inventory we assessed 3 distinct symptoms: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and low personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation are clearly subjective psychopathological phenomena. The Area of Worklife Survey [3] is used for the assessment of workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values. These factors are attributes to the workplace, in our case, attributes to the medical school.

The outcome of our study definitely shows, that a great part of burnout aetiology comes from academic stress and factors, for which medical schools are responsible. The argument that most of the burnout symptoms come mainly from personal psychopathology would therefore be a not justifiable shortcut. It is important to view burnout as a result of a multifactorial process. Furthermore, it could lead medical schools to shift the responsibility for the genesis of burnout to the individual student.

Thus, medical schools have to take care for students and to structure the academic load in a manageable way. Furthermore, medical schools should provide additional support to their students such as academic and psychological counselling and preventive courses (e.g. yoga, mindfulness, relaxation ...).

In addition to the reduction of burnout, these measures would have strong preventive power to reduce the continuation of burnout into residency and beyond.

Conflict of interest L. Thun-Hohenstein, K. Lampert, and C. Fritz declare that they have no competing interests.

References

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