

Dear Colleagues:

When we chose our careers, we committed ourselves to helping others. Our clinical work reflects an armamentarium for managing complex conditions but it is the patients and the families, the difficult conversations and the invested trust, the connections and the gratitude that defines what it means to be a provider of surgical care. We also commit ourselves to our families and friends; the relationships that sustain and inspire us in different but equally important ways.

What about our commitment to helping ourselves? Especially during this unprecedented global pandemic it is very easy to tell ourselves that “we know how to work hard” and “no need take a break, we are tough, we are surgeons”. It is easy, and it is our nature, to put the wellbeing of others first. Indeed it is easy to forget that self-care is not selfish. I encourage everyone to reflect on whether your current lifestyle supports your personal integrity: Are you thriving or merely surviving?

The nature of a surgical career is unique. The hours are long and the demands are endless. However the work is truly amazing. We are incredibly fulfilled by our work, but this alone cannot protect our psyche. Multiple risk factors jeopardize mental well-being. The larger picture points to many key issues such as a lack of infrastructural mechanisms supporting optimal performance, and in many cases, ineffective personal coping mechanisms. Most physician wellness interventions to date have been aimed at the latter with only marginal improvements. This is unsurprising. The most resilient individual can only rise as far as their infrastructure will permit.

As a community, it is our duty to reconcile this and facilitate a career environment where everyone feels supported in their personal and professional goals. Like anything worthwhile, it will take time and effort - and lots of it. It will have to start by acknowledging that there is indeed a problem. I'm grateful for the support of the CSVS to survey the national membership to obtain a sense of what is the Canadian reality in vascular surgery. Not surprisingly vascular surgeons in Canada are not unaffected. I'd like to share the highlights of these data presented in the fall AGM as a rallying cry for us to do better for ourselves and for the future of Vascular Surgery in Canada.

Key findings:

This was the first study to quantify burnout and causal factors in Canadian vascular surgeons.

- *Burnout is primarily attributed to infrastructural limitations and conflicting institutional demands, citing a lack of collegial and administrative support.*
- *The commonly cited stressors included poor work-life balance, lack of support systems, toxic working environment/bullying, and unrealistic job expectations.*
- *Respondents derive great purpose from their careers yet over half of respondents would not recommend it to others.*
- *34% response rate with demographic profile indicative of membership with respect to gender, practice institution, background, and family arrangement*
- *Burnout was reported in 34% of respondents.*
- *Symptoms of emotional exhaustion were present in 50% of respondents, depersonalization in 25% and reduced sense of accomplishment in 35%.*
- *71% reported the ability to separate stress from providing high-quality care while 29% felt poor emotional health rendered them less able to do so*

-53% of reported symptoms of depression and loss of interest in previously enjoyed things

-30% reported increased callousness towards others

-10% experienced panic attacks within the past six months.

-No significant admission in correlation to medical errors or substance-dependency was found

I am not totally disheartened because I see and hear about incremental changes every day across North America to acknowledge and address physician wellness. I see physician burnout finally taking its place at conferences and in stakeholder conversations across North America. I see the stigma surrounding mental health slowly (very slowly) collapsing. I see incoming cohorts of trainees unafraid to address the importance of wellness. Most importantly, I see my peers and friends leaning on one another and checking in on each other while we try to survive this global disaster and maintain dignity and care for our patients. These are tough times and in a moment where physical distance is paramount for safety, social connectivity is protective against burnout.

I encourage my fellow vascular colleagues across the country to uphold this momentum for the desire of personal sustainability. Victor Hugo said: "No army can stop an idea whose time has come". It is time to address the fact that our health and wellbeing matters too. Institutional changes occur slowly but our personal ones don't have to, and we should work together to remodel our culture and the future of our specialty and ourselves. Practice kindness towards others but also towards yourself.

I am humbled by this undertaking and encourage you to reach out with your ideas, or questions at any time.

Resources

We encourage you to visit the CMA's Physician Wellness Hub for helpful resources and direct access to their Help Line: <https://www.cma.ca/physician-health-and-wellness>

The CMPA also offers handbooks, resources toolkits, peer support, Help Lines, and links to your province-specific health program. <https://www.cmpa-acpm.ca/en/advice-publications/physician-wellness>

Stay safe. Be kind.

Warmly,

Dr. Giuseppe Papia

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