The Other Side of the Gurney: Patients’ Perspectives on Physician Wellness

Claire Snyman, Alicia Polachek MA, Jane Lemaire MD
Faculty:

Claire Snyman: Canadian Medical Association Patient Voice Member
Alicia Polachek MA: Program Manager W21C Research and Innovation Centre, Cumming School of Medicine, University of Calgary; Program Manager Well Doc Alberta
Jane Lemaire MD FRCPC: Clinical Professor of Medicine, Cumming School of Medicine, University of Calgary; Physician Lead Well Doc Alberta

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Objectives

At the end of this session participants will be able to:

- Describe how patients experience physician wellness or unwellness
- Examine how physician wellness links to patient care
- Appraise how patients can support physician wellness
Understanding How Patients Perceive Physician Wellness and Its Links to Patient Care

A Qualitative Study

Jane Lemaire MD
Darby Ewashina MD
Alicia Polachek MA
Jaya Dixit MA
Verna Yiu MD
Physician Wellness...

Is an important topic

Impacts individual physicians and healthcare systems

Has been proposed as a missing quality indicator of healthcare systems

Has a powerful public health influence
Physicians may still feel that wellness is at odds with professionalism.
What Do Patients Think?
What’s Missing?

Little is known about patients’ perceptions of physician wellness and how it links to patient care.

Limited research has considered patients’ views of physician body weight.
Understanding how patients perceive physician wellness and its links to patient care: A qualitative study

Jane B. Lemaire1,2,*, Darby Ewashina3, Alicia J. Polasek4, Jaya Dixit5, Verna Yu6
1 Cumming School of Medicine, Department of Medicine, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, 2 W21C Research and Innovation Center, Cumming School of Medicine, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, 3 Cumming School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, 4 University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, 5 Alberta Health Services, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

* These authors contributed equally to this work.

Abstract

Despite increased interest in physician wellness, little is known about patients' views on the topic. We explore patients' perceptions of physician wellness and how it links to patient care. This exploratory, qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of 20 patients from outpatient care settings in a western Canadian city. Using inductive thematic analysis, interview transcripts were independently coded by two authors and then discussed to ensure consensus and to abstract into higher-level themes. Three overarching premises were identified. First, patients notice cues that they interpret as signs of physician wellness. These include overt indications, such as a physician's demeanor or physical appearance, along with a general impression about a physician's wellness. Second, patients form judgments based on what they notice, and these judgments affect patients' views about their care; feelings, such as trust, in their interactions with physicians; and actions, such as following care plans. Third, participants perceive a bi-directional link between physician wellness and patient care. Physician wellness impacts patient care, but physician wellness is also impacted by the care they provide and the challenges they face within the healthcare system. Patients' judgments regarding physician wellness may have important impacts on the doctor-patient relationship. Furthermore, patients appear to have a nuanced understanding about how physicians' work may put physicians at risk for being unwell. Patients may be powerful allies in supporting physician wellness initiatives focused on the shared responsibility of individual physicians, the medical profession, and healthcare organizations.
Study Aim

To explore patients’ perspectives on physician wellness and how physician wellness links to patient care
Methods

Qualitative study design

Non-probability convenience sample
>18 years of age
urban outpatient settings

20 participants interviewed
March – November 2015
7 in person; 13 via telephone

Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews
Participants were encouraged to draw on personal experiences, examples from friends or family, and general perceptions
What does “doctor wellness,” “doctor health,” or “doctor well-being” mean to you?

What might “doctor health”, “well-being”, or “wellness” look like? What might unwellness look like?

Does that idea of wellness in doctors differ from how you see wellness in yourself and in your own life?

Do you think that a doctor’s wellness is linked to patient care?

Do you think that a doctor’s appearance of being well or unwell could influence their relationship with the patient?

Do you think doctors have a professional responsibility to be well? If so, what do you think doctors should do to stay well?
Demographics

Sex
55% female; 45% male

Marital status
45% married or common law; 35% divorced or widowed; 20% single/never married

Parental status
75% had children; 25% had no children

Average age
57 years (range 25-92 years)
Demographics

Education
40% post-secondary credential; 50% some post-secondary training; 10% no post-secondary

Employment status
50% retired/semi-retired; 20% unemployed; 30% employed

Ratings of physical health compared to others their age:
5% excellent; 30% very good; 40% good; 10% fair; 15% poor

Ratings of mental/emotional health compared to others their age:
15% excellent; 30% very good; 35% good; 15% fair; 5% unreported

Frequency of interactions with the healthcare system
20% weekly; 45% monthly; 20% every 2-3 months; 15% less than yearly
Data Analysis – Inductive Thematic Analysis

- Independent coding by 2 authors
- Consensus achieved through discussion
- Similar codes grouped into themes
- Similar themes grouped into larger overarching themes
- Development of theoretical concepts and their meaning
Summary of Results

3 Overarching Premises

#1 Patients notice cues about physicians that they interpret as signs of wellness/unwellness

#2 These judgments influence how patients View their care Feel about encounters with a physician Act within the doctor-patient relationship

#3 Patients perceive a bi-directional link between physician wellness and patient care
#1 Patients notice cues about physicians...
...that they interpret as signs of wellness/unwellness

**Overt indicators**
- Physical appearance
- Demeanor
- Work pace
- Signs of stress

**General impression**
- A sense
- Consistency between visits
- Job fulfillment

[https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/under-pressure-how-can-we-better-protect-health-professionals-from-burnout/ Mar 24 2019](https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/under-pressure-how-can-we-better-protect-health-professionals-from-burnout/ Mar 24 2019)
#1 Patients notice cues about physicians... ...that they interpret as signs of wellness/unwellness

Signs of stress

“...they are looking. . . totally run off their feet and totally stressed out and. . . like you know you are the fifty-sixth thousandth patient that they have seen and they can’t keep the case straight, they can’t keep your record straight, they can’t keep your question straight, it kind of leads you to wonder is he in any condition to be doing this right now you know.” [18]
#2 These judgments influence...

How patients view their care
How patients feel during encounters
How patients act within the doctor-patient relationship
#2 These judgments influence... 
... how patients view their care

Physicians who are viewed as unwell were described as

- Less connected within the medical community
- Less competent and more prone to errors
- Less appropriate with patients and staff
- Disorganized, with a higher likelihood of mix-ups
- More likely to place added responsibilities on patients to limit their problems and self-diagnose

https://vjulily.wordpress.com/2010/10/18/unsanitary-hospitals-due-to-sick-doctors/
Organizational skills

“He had the wrong information, he had to go back out and come back in... and when he sat down to talk to us he wasn’t really on top of what, what was going on, he actually had to apologize about 3 times while we were there for the fact that he didn’t really know what the hell was going on, ‘cause his record keeping and stuff was so bad.” [3]
#2 These judgments influence...
...how patients feel during encounters

With physicians they viewed as unwell, participants felt

- Less comfortable
- Less trusting
- Less willing to see the doctor/more likely to end that doctor-patient relationship
- As though they were not treated holistically or with compassion and empathy
Trust

“I rarely doubt the medical advice that they are capable of giving but certainly you know we pick up on so much as people that even if it is conscious or subconscious you may have a lack of or loss of trust.” [10]
These judgments influence how patients act within the doctor-patient relationship.

With physicians they viewed as unwell, participants:

- Questioned recommendations and were less adherent to care plans.
- Advocated more aggressively for their own care.
- Altered their interactions so as to not further overwhelm the physician.

Compassion and concern for the doctor
“...I start worrying about them, especially if I’m in a relationship with them over a period of years, I’ll send them gifts or cards because you know I worry about them.” [4]

Altering their interactions
“Maybe they had three things to talk to the doctor about, and maybe they will just talk about the most important one and leave the other two for another day because the doctor is stressed out.” [15]
#3 Patients perceive a bi-directional link between physician wellness and patient care
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Physicians were described as humans who are impacted by

- The weight of patient and societal expectations
- Their responsibility to serve as role models
- Their abilities to set boundaries, manage stress, and lead a healthy, balanced life
#3 Patients perceive a bi-directional link between physician wellness and patient care

Patient and societal expectations

“...in society you know doctors have been sort of placed on a pedestal and viewed as being demi-gods or something you know, they are in the end just people and they suffer from the same illnesses and same kind of stress that we do in our lives and aren’t always given the room to look out for themselves.” [12]
#3 Patients perceive a bi-directional link between physician wellness and patient care

Physicians are impacted by system factors such as

- High work demands and expectations
- Poor access to resources for patient care and physician wellness
- Lack of patient accountability for self-care
#3 Patients perceive a bi-directional link between physician wellness and patient care

Work demands and expectation

“...I always find that surprising, that we put doctors on floors; ...[doctors] that are **12, 14, 16, 20 hours into shifts** and it doesn’t make any sense to me whatsoever, so I think **those are systematic failures**…” [10]
#3 Patients perceive a bi-directional link between physician wellness and patient care

Patient self-responsibility

“...doctors are people too and they have bad days and they have good days and they are just like everybody else their wellness and their mental health can’t be perfect all the time because it’s impossible so we [patients] need to take some ownership for things that happen as well and just, you know, do some research into things as well...” [15]
#3 Patients perceive a bi-directional link between physician wellness and patient care

Patient care impacts physician wellness

“People walking in with the expectation that doctors are supposed to fix them. And doctors being the professionals that they are and having taken an oath to do the best they can I think that must be overwhelming or frustrating or energy sucking for any better term where you go in and it’s a constant mill of ‘help me, help me, help me.’” [4]
Limitations

Recruited patients from a single urban center

Recruited participants from outpatient settings, and most of their responses appeared to reflect outpatient experiences

Sample included a large proportion of retired older adults with relatively frequent interactions with the healthcare system
Conclusions

Patients’ judgments about physician wellness have important influences on the doctor-patient relationship.

“Reverse-caring” may result in patients foregoing their own needs.

Patients have a nuanced understanding about how physicians’ work may put them at risk of being unwell.
Conclusions

Patients may be important allies in supporting physician wellness
The Other Side of the Gurney: Patients’ Perspectives on Physician Wellness

Claire Snyman
@clairehsnyman
Patient-doctor relationship

fragile + complex
joy

of work
Connect, communicate & collaborate

#activatedpatient

Public awareness @ #physicianwellness?

Create demand for change from those who are being cared for
Trust

I wonder .........
Too many patients, too much admin, not enough time or resources

Can't provide the care he wants to those who need it
“How does #physicianhealth and #physicianwellness impact your patient care?”
“I care and want my physician healthy and want my health systems to support them so then I can partner with them and get safer care”

“Physician wellbeing is very important & not understood or acknowledged enough”

“We are all human, whether #patients or HCP, persons wellbeing is important to all.”

“I want my #healthcare team to have the support they need (mentally & resources) to provide me the best care possible”

“Stressors to physicians impact the quality of care my family receives.”
“a high performing health system is one with healthy docs"

“Studies have found the cost of physician burnout is massive to the health system. We need to create health promoting environments for both patients and health professionals”
- Increase general public awareness
- Educate about impacts of #physicianwellness
- Healthy physician
- Support sustainable healthcare behaviours
- Support that health care systems and the medical system are responsible for care of both patients + health care teams
Patients as partners in physician wellness
Questions

1. How can we increase awareness about physician wellness and its impact on patient care?

2. How can patients partner with physicians to advocate for and support physician wellness?

3. Is there a role for patients to support their physician(s) if they notice signs of burnout and fatigue?
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