Doctors as patients
As doctors, the health of our patients is paramount but what about our own? In this section both Dr Polly Danks and our London South Rep. Dr Brendan O’Brien share their personal experiences of having a chronic health problem and some tips they have learnt.

If you need official guidance on sick leave in GP training, An updated version of the sick leave guidance for GP trainees is now available. Please follow the link to our website


This guidance is intended to clarify sick leave arrangements in line with the Framework Contract agreed between GPC and COGPED.

What to do if you are unwell during your training

As a medic with a chronic health condition I have been plagued over the years with relapses of my condition. This has required me to periodically have time off work. My absences from work have often led to me feeling guilty for a variety of reasons: guilt in knowing that I am causing disruption to the Rota, guilt towards the patients who I am not there to help, guilt towards my team members for adding stress onto their workload due to my absence. Other emotions also ensue: anger, depression and helplessness to name but a few. Over the years however, I have gained a certain amount of acceptance and I have realized that it is inevitable that I am at times going to succumb to my illness and need time off work together with treatment and support.

My own experiences have prompted me to write this article. I feel it is important that trainees and health professionals alike know what to do and how to cope when they are unwell. I think the most important thing is to recognize when you are unwell. Acceptance is the key. Insight into your own health is a must and we all have to acknowledge that we aren’t superhuman and just like our patients; we too are vulnerable to illness. Whatever the illness may be whether flu, cancer or a mental health condition it is important that we take the time to get proper treatment and support to ensure that we are able to return to optimum health.

Sometimes it is useful to detach yourself and ask “what would I advise a patient or colleague if they were in my situation?” At times we try to carry on regardless and put up with a niggling health problem but in order to be “good Doctors” we must first learn to take good care of ourselves. When feeling unwell, the first port of call should be your GP who can if necessary refer or get the involvement of a specialist. Human resources, clinical supervisors and family and friends are all avenues of support in terms of the emotional stress of being ill and the worry over work. Personally, I have found that by being honest about my health issues and involving HR, my clinical and educational supervisors and at times the manager at work I have been able to ensure that my needs are met in terms of my health. I have also been able to access much needed support by communicating my problems with these people. Whilst confidentiality is a personal choice, in my experience I have found that being open has enabled me to achieve the best results both in terms of people understanding my absence and also in gaining a supported return to work following each relapse. Whether you have a physical or a mental health issue it is important to prioritize your health. Don’t neglect to look after yourself in favour of letting people down.

Dr Polly Danks
Own health first
As well as being doctors, nearly all of us are relatives of users of the health service and some of us are also patients. The busy nature of our work and the pressures we work under can sometimes make prioritising our own health difficult. As GP trainees we are likely to rotate through an almost unparalleled number of diverse employers during our training and this article is written to go give a few words of advice to those who may have chronic health problems.

Don’t diagnose (or treat) thy self
Ensure you are registered with a local GP practice (select one you will not rotate through during your training). Try and see a senior permanent doctor there when needed, their independence and objectivity can be a real help. Depending on the nature of the condition, given your training you maybe able to sort out many issues over telephone or email these days.

Pre-empt potential problems
Meeting or having a telephone chat with occupational health before you start a job can be very beneficial. They can review the details of any personal health problems and recommend to your Consultant (if in hospital posts) or your Practice (if in GP) any changes to working conditions or patterns are needed (including regular paid time off for own hospital appointments as necessary). They won’t normally disclose the nature or specific details of health problems other than the fact that you have one. Getting occupational health advice when in GP posts can be more complicated as Deaneries often only contract out for OH advice at the start of the training scheme, but speak to them or your Programme Director if you feel you need to see OH as this can be arranged.

Maintain professional boundaries
Doctors who are also patients can sometimes feel that boundaries are blurred. Colleagues may not mean to be intrusive when asking about your own health, but you are not their patient and it is ok to keep your personal information private. Try not to get even informal advice from your Consultant or Trainer, you should be getting this from your own GP or specialist; leave your seniors at work to concentrate on your clinical supervision and training.

Exams, exams, exams
The RCGP can make specific arrangements for trainees with health problems, particularly those with a condition that is classifiable as a disability. These can apply to both the AKT and the CSA to try and ensure that no candidate is unfairly disadvantaged.

Pre-empt problems wherever possible
Arranging locum cover or cancelling clinics is easiest with as much notice as possible. If you feel that an absence might last several days from the outset, it is far easier for everyone if this is said initially rather than making arrangements day by day. If you return to work earlier than previously expected you can always see on-the-day patients rather than having a clinic booked which has to be cancelled.

Learn from your own experiences
Being a patient can give you a unique insight that can help make you a better doctor. You may be better able to explain to patients what their healthcare experience is likely to entail including some of the frustrations of the NHS. Even some simple advice such as “when being admitted, bringing a phone charger, headphones, ear pugs and some light reading will make things that much easier” tends to go down very well. Additional services are also available depending on where you work and the nature of the problem. These include the BMA’s Doctors Advice Service, the Practitioner Health Programme in London, the Sick Doctors Trust and MEDNET. Details are all online.

Dr Brendan O’Brien
London South Representative