

Prioritising wellness to retain young healthcare professionals

Doctors and healthcare workers in South Africa have been caught in the eye of the Covid-19 storm: we have actively fought as the frontline of defence to curb the spread of the virus, as well as continued to provide the best possible care we could to our patients.



Image source: Getty/Gallo

Compounded by other challenges that have been exacerbated by the global pandemic – including a shortage of healthcare workers, long hours, often difficult and under-equipped and resourced working environments and extreme stress levels – and it is little surprise that young healthcare practitioners in the country, in particular, are near breaking point and many are even considering leaving the profession.

Perhaps worse than the threat living and working through a pandemic has posed to our physical health and wellness, is the toll it has taken on our mental wellbeing. We know that if we take all possible precautions to keep safe, such as wearing the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) and continuously washing and sanitising our hands, we can at least minimise the risk of being exposed to the virus.

However, the relentless stress and anxiety of working in these conditions is more difficult to counter. In fact, the [Philips Future Health Index \(FHI\) South Africa 2020](#) has found that one of the most critical themes to emerge for the next generation of the healthcare workforce over the next 20 years is the need to create the ideal healthcare working environment in order to retain younger healthcare professionals and protect the integrity of South Africa's healthcare system into the future.

This means prioritising our overall wellness, encompassing physical, mental and emotional wellbeing.

Younger South African healthcare professionals commonly experience and suffer from burnout: 82% of younger South African healthcare professionals in the Future Health Index reported regularly experiencing work-related stress. Nearly half – 43% – have considered leaving the profession as a result of work-related stress. This is 9% points higher than the average of all countries surveyed (34%).

Where wellbeing and wellness meet

As a younger South African healthcare professional, I see and experience these statistics in action every day. And the best way we can prevent an early exodus of this bright young talent from the profession is for current healthcare leaders to prioritise the career satisfaction of the next generation by taking care of all their talents' needs including creating a better work-life balance, improved working hours and autonomy in the hospital or practice where they are working.

Minimising stress, fostering a supportive workplace and helping overcome barriers to change are the most effective ways to help younger South African healthcare professionals – and the report indicated that we view technology as a key driver in being able to reduce work-related stress levels. I know I see it as a vital tool in helping to treat patients and improve their experience, as well as in allowing me to spend more time with my patients by taking care of some aspects of my job for me. Ultimately, I know that this will bring down my stress levels.

I also know I'm not alone in feeling like this: 63% of other younger South African healthcare professionals expect that the adoption of digital health technologies will bring down their stress levels. This has the potential to encourage us to stay in the field – particularly if it drives work-life balance.

Younger South African healthcare professionals highly value factors around a good work-life balance, the latest technology and workplace culture, and use these as the main deciding factors when choosing where we work. For example, 93% of us rate the latest technology as a deciding factor, while 92% of us feel that work-life balance is critical – and 96% of us prioritise workplace culture.

All of these rank more highly than the average of our counterparts in the other countries surveyed, showing just how important it is for us as younger South African healthcare professionals to take care of our wellbeing.

What these statistics also show is that we are at a critical crossroads in healthcare in South Africa, and that to choose the right path to protect the country's health system will require encouraging and enabling the next generation of healthcare professionals.

This will mean investing in and harnessing technology to improve clinical performance and work-life balance by minimizing stress and burnout, as well as offering greater flexibility through staggered shifts and involving younger South African healthcare professionals in the operational and decision-making sides of the business.

Although there is undoubtedly a long road ahead to equip us adequately and effectively as the next generation of healthcare leaders, greater implementation and adoption of technology paired with a focus on our overall wellbeing hold the key to reaching our destination and transforming the face of healthcare in South Africa.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Nokukhanya Khanyile is a medical doctor and vice president of Mental Matters. She was voted one of the 100 Most Influential South Africans, and is an established advocate for mental health for healthcare professionals and has taken a particular interest in creating an ideal work environment for healthcare professionals in South Africa.

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