

Increased Workload in Interns of a Government Dental Hospital

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Abstract: Dental internship is one of the most turning points in life of a dental surgeon. Residency in India gives an intern with immense workload which can hamper confidence and work style of a dentist. Thus this review article gives an overview of problem faced by an intern of a government dental college and various ways to cope such pressure and workload.

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I. Introduction

The health care industry is continuously growing and it largely depends on labor and their productivity. The health care system in India is very large and continuously expanding¹. An engaged workforce can be described as one where the staff is motivated, loyal and committed to increasing productivity of themselves and their organization². An engaged employee has a strong positive relation with the goals of the organization they work in². According to Hewison, Gale, Yeats & Shapiro engagement of staff is strongly driven when the individuals have a sense belonging to the organization and feel valued.³ Thus, an engaged workforce can help in increasing productivity of an organization.

Context:

The dental residents spend one year post their bachelor's degree in a compulsory one year rotary internship. There are mostly 7-8 outpatient departments (OPDs) separated on the basis of dental specialization. There are not more than 4-5 interns posted at a point of time in each OPD. The interns who have had clinical training in the previous 2 academic years are given the responsibility of carrying out the entire clinical procedures like extraction, oral health assessment, scaling, root canal treatment etc. There are generally 1-2 senior dentists in each OPD and rest are junior students working under the guidance of teachers, seniors and interns. The senior doctors look into serious cases and most of the other dentist staff is busy taking classes or attending to complicated cases. This results in the huge work load falling upon the interns. The interns have no control over their workload as the working environment has a hierarchy in place.

Impact of increased workload amongst interns

Medical residency or Internship in hospitals (dental or medical) are considered to be one of the most challenging times in a doctor's or dentist's career owing to the increased workload.⁴ The increased work load is attributed to pressure from senior doctors, no control over their duty hours, increased responsibility etc. which also leads to stress and burn out⁴ The increased work load can thereby lead to decreased patient safety and inadequate attention which can in turn affect the overall productivity of the organization due to poor quality of care.⁴ Kreimer⁵ suggests that increased workload is having more than acceptable number of patients allotted to one resident. This can lead to the resident forgetting some important treatment steps. Ogunjipe further states that increased work load can also be due to difficult patients, lack of social support and gender based issues.⁶ Lack of social support can be attributed to long working hours causing interns to have decreased time for socialization.

Increased workload as mentioned before can lead to burn out, stress and most importantly medical errors. Burn out has been defined as a state of mental exhaustion, cynicism and having a sense of low personal effectiveness.⁴ Burn out has known to cause serious toll on the mental health. It becomes essential to deal with burn out as it has been known to occur more in younger residents or interns which further highlights importance of decreasing workload on interns. Thus, increased work load directly threatens patient safety and it is essential

to combat this issue in the most effective way possible.⁶ the existence of hierarchy also results in increased overload. Hierarchy has been known to inhibit effective communication between the different staff members. Ineffective communication has been known to cause medical errors⁷. It being a government hospital catered to large number of patients belonging to low socioeconomic status. The patients belonging to low socio economic status generally seek only health care services in acute conditions instead of primary care which proves to be more costly for the health services.⁸ The medical errors caused due to increased work load combined with patients from low social economic status can thereby cause serious financial strain on the hospital.⁶ The conflicts and issues arising due to increased work load largely hampered the overall productivity of our hospital. Thus, it becomes essential to strategically deal with the prevailing issues and understand the importance of change in the current system where interns or residents are being subjected to increased workload.

Leadership strategies

An engaged workforce who is dedicated to their work can help in creating a positive environment.⁹ A positive environment is one where there is a culture of appreciation and encouragement between the different staff members. This can occur if the work load is distributed equally with no group of doctors or dentists in this case feel targeted leading to their burn out and decreased productivity outcome for the organization. A conflict can arise when two or more sets of people work together.¹⁰ The poor quality of care due to increased workload and aforementioned issues can thereby lead to a conflict. Conflict can cause negative impact on the morale of the individuals working in the hospital in this case interns.¹⁰ it is important to understand that interns are already under pressure, have long working hours and are working beyond their capacity. The hierarchy results in lack of communication between interns and their senior doctors. Ineffective conflict management is one of the prime cause of poor quality of care, job dissatisfaction, poor work environment and increased costs¹¹. Conflict management and resolution can thereby help in resolving the conflicts and help in distribution of work more uniformly.

Self-leader

I would like to use Australian Health LEADS framework as guidance towards becoming a self-leader.¹² Health LEADS framework states that in order to become a self-leader, one needs to be self-aware and know their strengths and limitations. For example: it is essential to reflect on my own strengths like public speaking skills and employ them in the right situations. A leader should be able to engage others in an effective manner. This means when I take the initiation to be a self-leader, I shall first communicate with my fellow interns. In order to engage others, it is essential to respect each other and be honest. This is important while engaging with the rest of the dentists includes senior dentists and also the administrative department. This can help in strengthening relations. The Australian Health LEADS framework talks about achieving outcomes by setting up goal, bring innovation by supporting change and shape systems by building alliances.¹² An intern may not be able to bring an organizational change but can behave as a self-leader amongst interns and initiate resolution of conflicts. By taking the step of being a self-leader, I can attempt to resolve conflicts and build a way to communicate the problems of interns to the senior dentists. This is essential because currently there is no grievance committee catering to the needs of the interns or any communication structure is in place to help them. I believe that by resolving the conflicts and by building communication platform the organization can head towards a positive change. Therefore, in the following paragraphs, I would like to discuss methods of conflict management that can be used to achieve final outcome i.e., decreasing the workload amongst the interns.

Simpao states that there are five crucial parts of conflict resolution: communication, avoidance, compromise, accommodation and collaboration.¹⁰ Similarly Leon-Perez, Notelaers, & Leon-Rubio suggests a dual concern model of conflict resolution where there are two sides: one being the concerns of the individual themselves and the other being the other individual or party's concerns.¹³ Kim-Jo, Benet-Martínez, & Ozer also name this as assertiveness (own concern) and cooperativeness (other party's concern).¹⁴ In context, this means the interest, beliefs and values of interns being the first party and the other party is the senior doctors and administration and their concerns. They also divide the solutions into: collaboration, competition, accommodation and avoidance. The authors highlight collaboration as the most successful one as it encourages effective communication and problem solving behavior. This concerns both the parties and should be kept at top priority. Collaboration helps in reaching solutions which can help in workers satisfaction and psychological well-being which are significantly important in reducing burn out. The second that needs focus is accommodation i.e., the other party is willing to accept the changes in an effective manner. The last but not the least is compromise. In addition to this, skills of effective communication are extremely important. Imperfect communication can easily lead to conflict.¹⁰

- **Collaboration** – the first step of collaboration is to define the problem and to decide the stakeholders. A certain level autonomy is needed so no pressure from either sides occurs.¹⁵ The next steps involve setting of

rules on how the collaboration shall work, setting of agenda which would benefit both sides and joint searching of solutions and weighing their strengths and weakness.¹⁵ It is important to have alternative solutions to all problems. By applying this to our context, collaboration may work to a certain extent. For example: defining of the problem can be first done by the interns and the senior doctors separately and then they can come together to see the similarities and differences in their opinions. This itself would open the pathway to change as both parties may not have clear perspective of each other's problems. Joint searching for solutions can again prove to be beneficial as both parties would understand their limitations and to what extent they are ready to step out of their comfort zone. In order for collaboration to work, it has to be true to its own meaning i.e., bringing different groups together. When different groups are brought together, they are able to decide a common goal¹⁶. In health care the common goal is already decided which is good quality of care (by increasing patient safety, decreasing medical errors and increasing organization's productivity).¹⁶ Therefore, to achieve a common goal one needs to work like a team. Collaboration can thereby help in forming of a team and find solutions that would satisfy concerns of both teams with the common goal in mind.

- **Accommodation** – It is an unassertive technique to resolve minor conflicts.¹⁰ This is more of being selfless and attending to the opposite sides concerns to avoid further conflicts. The advantage of accommodation is that it minimizes differences if each party is ready to accept their wrongs.¹⁷ Bringing this in context, the increased work load on interns calls for realization of the senior dentists about the uneven distribution of workload. However, due to existing hierarchy, this may not be as effective as expected. However accommodation requires cooperation between the two parties which is possible through collaboration thereby one can expect accommodation to be effective as well.¹⁷ This is because collaboration can occur only when both parties communicate with each other thereby informing the senior dentists about the overload.

- **Compromise** – It is when both the sides are ready to resolve the conflicts, by both parties sacrificing something. It is a more of an alternative solution if the collaboration and accommodation don't work.¹⁷ Compromise is done only in very complicated situations for which a common solution is hard to come up with. Dr. Z.A. dental college and hospital has limited resources and funding. Appointment of more staff may not be a possible solution. Instead, the senior dentists can offer to sacrifice on their break hours or attend OPD's even when they are not the main consultant for that day. The interns may have to continue to put in long hours but with senior dentists, there would be less number of patients allotted to each of them. This can help in both the parties reaching a middle ground position where each of their concerns are partially satisfied.

The interns are subjected to very less praise and do not have very high salary. A government dental college may not be able to increase their salaries but a culture of praising them for their hard work can help in motivating them to work with dedication. The intrinsic motivation or rewards consist of four components: sense of meaningfulness (the work one is doing is beneficial), sense of choice (having option of choosing the work one wishes to do), sense of competence (doing good quality of work) and sense of progress (the effort one is putting in their work is helping them accomplish something important¹⁸). The interns if learn to motivate themselves and are also given some control over the work they want to do, it can lead to better job satisfaction and also decrease work load and burn out. I as a self-leader can encourage and motivate my fellow interns and help in creating a positive environment.

II. Conclusion

It is difficult for an intern alone to lead the organization to better quality outcomes. However, initiation by using leadership strategies and resolving conflicts can help the organization towards the path of change. Increased work load in interns is an issue which has not been widely researched and even though burn out amongst the interns or medical residents does exist, at the moment this issue has little priority. The lack of research is more in developing countries owing to the exploding population, excessive work load and financial restraints. The increased workload is in turn more costly and affects the quality of work and needs to be given attention. A self-leader driving the change can prove to be beneficial. For example: decrease work load, communication of existing problems and helping the organization to work as team can have a positive impact. Thus leadership strategies can help in resolution of conflicts and decreasing of workload.

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