

Physician, heal thyself

The stress, pressure and long hours that most medical practitioners are exposed on a daily basis does increase the risk to their health.



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"Doctors and nurses often work more than 12 hours a day and neglect themselves in the process," says Nicole Jennings from Pharma Dynamics

They may be sleep deprived, live on junk food and many may suffer emotionally from the loneliness that stems from broken relationships as a result of their pressurised working environment and time away from loved ones.

While they've taken an oath to treat and care for their patients, they often don't (necessarily have the time to) practice self-care especially when it comes to healthy eating, getting enough sleep and exercising regularly.

"Many healthcare practitioners may feel they are expected to sacrifice their own health for the needs of their patients, but the reality is they are of no use to their patients if they don't make their own health and well-being a priority," says Jennings.

In 2017, an amendment was made to the 2,500-year-old Hippocratic Oath, to include a clause on self-care. The World Medical Association voted on the [amendment](#) aimed at improving the health and well-being of healthcare professionals. The

oath, which was last amended in 1964, now reads as follows: "I will attend to my own health, well-being and abilities in order to provide care of the highest standard."

In 2016, a locally produced film, *Doc-U-Mentally*, shone the spotlight on the plight of junior doctors, their working conditions and the detrimental effects thereof. The award-winning film told the story of five doctors and how working 30-hour shifts impacts their mood, performance, stress, anxiety and personal safety. Jennings says, the film has helped to give doctors and nurses (the world-over) a voice with many authorities, including our own, reviewing the arduous working hours that doctors are subjected to, but until then healthcare practitioners need to take stock of their own physical health.

"We want those in the medical field to prioritise their health in 2019," she says.

Diet

[Research](#) published in the *Journal of Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* suggests that irregular eating patterns can lead to various diseases including type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and obesity. The study found that shift workers, in particular, are also at greater risk of diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease and metabolic syndrome, which is closely linked with type 2 diabetes.

Another [study](#) conducted by the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Fort Hare in East London, which was published in the *South African Family Practice Journal* found there to be a high prevalence of abdominal obesity among primary healthcare professional nurses (PHCPN) in the Eastern Cape. More than 200 nurses from 41 healthcare facilities in the province participated in the study over a period of three months. The study found that aside from work-related stress and unhealthy dietary practices, working night shifts greatly contributed to abdominal obesity.

Exercise

Another key aspect of healthy living is being physically active as exercise helps to prevent heart disease and stroke, reduces the risk of diabetes, some cancers and osteoporosis. She says it is often difficult to incorporate daily exercise into a busy routine, but there are a few exercises one can do on the job:

- Take the stairs instead of the lift. You can also walk the stairs during your lunch break.
- Instead of sending an email to your colleague, get up and walk to their desk to deliver the message.
- Get some light weights for the office or practice and do some resistance exercises while reading through a document at your desk. Resistance bands can also work well in this regard.
- Sitting at a desk and in front of a computer can cause stiffening of muscles and be detrimental to your posture leaving

you with back and neck pain. Set your alarm for every hour, get up, walk a bit and stretch for five minutes, before resuming work.

- Consider investing in a wireless-enabled, wearable device, that measures how many steps you've walked, your heart rate, quality of sleep and other metrics involved in fitness.

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