The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) believes that doctors have a responsibility to themselves, their families, their patients and the healthcare system to take care of their own health. The RACP encourages our members (Fellows and trainees) and all other doctors to attend their own general practitioner on a regular basis and to model healthy behaviours. We also urge all doctors to monitor their own physical and emotional wellbeing, and to seek assistance early if they have any concerns or feel they are experiencing significant stress. Caring for other doctors requires sensitivity and we encourage doctors to provide support and assistance to colleagues in a confidential manner. The RACP hopes to generate enthusiasm to pursue innovative approaches to support the health of doctors, and to raise awareness among our members as well as other doctors about the importance of safeguarding their own health and wellbeing.

Executive summary

- Doctors, like anyone else, need to look after their own health.
- As an important component of maintaining their own health, doctors should have their own general practitioner and undertake regular health checks.
- While doctors as a group enjoy comparatively good physical health, certain characteristics of the medical profession predispose doctors to specific health risks.
- Historically, the medical professional culture has encouraged doctors to sacrifice their own health through accepted practices such as working long hours and taking work home. Increasingly efforts are being made to address counterproductive workplace behaviours, and workplace bullying is no longer tolerated.
- Medical training presents an opportunity to increase healthy practices, awareness of warning signs, and strategies to manage stress. These may translate into lifelong protective habits and promote resilience. Continuing professional development also provides an opportunity to engage with doctors around the issue of maintaining their own health.
- When health concerns arise for doctors, they may be reluctant to seek appropriate medical care. Doctors may feel uncomfortable assuming the role of patient, and may opt instead to treat themselves or seek informal care from a colleague.
- Regulatory frameworks are an important consideration, as mandatory reporting of impaired doctors can act as a deterrent to seeking help.
- Doctors are encouraged to seek independent medical consultations, and there is growing recognition that a particular skill set can be taught to help doctors treat other doctors more effectively.
- Doctors’ health advisory and referral services are important avenues by which doctors can seek help, and these operate in all jurisdictions of Australia and New Zealand. We welcome the action that regulatory, accreditation and indemnity bodies are taking to support doctors’ health.
- Medical colleges have an important role as they engage with doctors in the course of their training and continuing professional development. The RACP has a number of initiatives underway and in development to support Fellows and Trainees with health concerns.
- Occupational and environmental medicine physicians and rehabilitation physicians have a key role to play in supporting impaired doctors to realise the health benefits of work.

The RACP encourages physicians and trainees to:

- Establish and maintain regular contact (healthcare) with a general practitioner (preferably outside of the family and practice setting).
- Adopt a balanced lifestyle — with time for self, family and friends, and for professional life (see over: Ten ways to be a healthier physician).
- Establish and/or participate in local professional support networks. These might include: professional supervision, mentor programs, peer support networks, or formal professional groups.
- Recognise that both personal life and professional life will be affected by work-related stress. Learn about the physical and emotional characteristics of excessive stress and burnout — in oneself, and in colleagues. Find out about action you can take if professional impairment is recognised in a colleague (e.g. role of local Medical Board).
- Incorporate health maintenance as part of professional life.
- Act now.
Ten ways to be a healthier physician

1. Have your own general practitioner.
2. Avoid taking work home.
3. Establish a buffer-zone (time out) between work and home.
4. Take control of your work hours. The following are a few examples:
   - Schedule breaks
   - Take days off
   - Strike a balance between the hours of paid work and the demands of your job
   - Put holidays in your diary months ahead and tell your family.
5. Manage your time by making realistic schedules and not over-committing yourself (at work or at home).
6. Manage your work environment. This may take time, new skills and lobbying for better work conditions.
7. Use your colleagues for support and maintain and work on relationships with your partner and friends.
8. Take time out for your own needs through such activities as relaxation, enjoying personal interests or pursuits and maybe spending time alone.
9. Do not feel guilty or “less of a doctor” for demanding a life balance.
10. Humour is therapeutic: surround yourself with fun and humour daily.

Signs of burnout

Would you recognise these signs of burnout in yourself or a colleague?

1. Emotional exhaustion
2. Cynicism
3. Perceived clinical ineffectiveness
4. Sense of depersonalisation in relationships with co-workers, patients or both

Consider how your health would be affected.

Key messages to doctors:

- Optimising your physical and mental health optimises your clinical efficacy, and also has benefits for your family.
- All doctors should have a general practitioner.
- Doctors should not self-treat or self-prescribe, nor treat or prescribe for family and friends.
- Be alert to the signs of stress and burnout, in yourself and in others.
- If you have a health concern, seek help.

For further information please contact policy@racp.edu.au