What causes doctors and nurses stress? I investigated this with a survey as part of my master’s degree and, at times, I was shocked by the responses.

In the current climate, it is perhaps unsurprising that 60% of nurses and 72% of doctors said they were extremely stressed at work. But the analysis brought me closer to what was causing this stress.

Most responses were from junior nurses. Time and time again participants nominated paperwork as one of the main factors. Nurses said they were stressed by government targets, management pressure, lack of time for adequate care of patients, increasing bureaucratic and regulatory procedures, low staff numbers and a poor skill mix. It was worrying to read the answers from nurses just starting out. Has their stress increased? It has, according to comments such as these: “Stress has increased over the years due to a colossal amount of paperwork set up by the trust/government. Therefore less [sic] staff to do actual patient care.”

Less than a quarter of the staff I studied were aware of any workplace initiative to help them deal with stress, and the majority of them had developed their own coping mechanisms. Despite this, I read page after page of newly qualified nurses crying out for help and support to cope with all the added pressure. These staff (who – according to the press – lack compassion) continue coming to work every day, staying late most of the time, not having breaks and going home shattered and in tears without any thanks. One nurse commented: “How about acknowledgment and praise from directorates and upper management that nursing staff and [healthcare assistants] do their best – in a difficult, high-pressured job. Rather than chastising us for not being able to always reach ridiculously set targets.”

I found nurses who are passionate about their jobs and desperate to deliver high-quality care - but are prevented from doing so because of pressure from higher up the chain of command.

Most headlines in the press suggest that nurses these days have no care and compassion skills and need to be taught how to be compassionate. However, it is evident that if nurses were given some care and compassion themselves, plus the time to deliver care, they could fulfil their often desperate ambition to deliver high-quality compassionate care to everyone.

In my opinion the findings of this study could likely be replicated in any hospital within England and probably the UK. How sad that in the age of phenomenal advances in medical technology and treatment staff are unable to do the one thing they are desperate to do: provide essential care. What they are condemned for lacking in the national press is precisely the type of care they want to provide more than anything. Most hospital staff don't need lessons in compassion, they need to be given the opportunity to carry out the jobs they were trained and want to do. Maybe then some of the stress might be reduced? So the question is who's caring for the carers? NT

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