

## FEATURE



# CARING FOR YOU

At an anaesthetic training position interview, the candidates' brighteyed looks, white smiles, crisp shirts and smartly pressed suits present only outward evidence to selection panellists that these hopeful individuals have not only survived medical training and built impressive CVs, but also have insight and resilience to care for themselves as individuals on behalf of their patients, writes Welfare of Anaesthetists Special Interest Group Chair, Dr Marion Andrew.

Training is structured and time-limited and trainees are expected to jump the prescribed exam hurdles, maintain full-time shift work, study, keep records of training and assessments, contribute to department education and projects, show consistently 'near-perfect' performance

and sometimes deal with adverse events. Outside work, trainees are often, at this time in their lives, establishing lasting relationships, marriages, buying homes and having children. Even for the devoted health junkie, it can be difficult to maintain an exercise regimen, healthy sleep patterns and good nutrition. Overall, I think it can be agreed that the anaesthetic profession can be a pretty demanding one – from start to finish.

### WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE HEALTH OF ANAESTHETISTS?

A survey of doctors in South Australia (2007) identified that 40% of the profession were without their own doctor<sup>1</sup>. From welfare literature, we know that trainees below

30 years of age are at risk of experiencing stress and potential burnout, with exams being the major trigger<sup>2</sup>. beyondblue recently identified that anaesthetists showed the highest rating of stress related to exams, with psychological distress, depression and suicidal thoughts also prevalent. Being aware that anaesthetists are at risk of suboptimal health, physically and mentally, urges us to do what we do well – risk manage!

### SUPPORTING THE PHYSICAL SELF—CARE AND COPING WITH STRESS

Knowing what you need to know is important. Unnecessary stresses evolve if we don't have all the information or fail to meet training targets. The new curriculum

and portfolio system has defined outcomes and timelines. Increasingly, rotational training schemes are running Part 0 courses which succinctly outline this information, so trainees can focus on the academic learning. Most regions run Part 1 and 2 courses and maximising access to these will make studying easier and allows the sharing of resources with other trainees. Taking advantage of these courses and gaining tips from those who have just completed their training is invaluable.

What about physical health? It's not rocket science and we all know what we 'should do'. We know, in theory, how to look after ourselves – eat well, get enough sleep, exercise etc. If we do have a physical illness, we know we need to be mindful of limitations. When we first start off, we are often able to maintain a balance and awareness, but it gets harder as exams loom and overtime increases and the pressures of senior responsibility build. An excellent GP can be one of your best allies. Those used to caring for doctors know how bad we are at looking after ourselves. Even if you have no physical complaints, making time to have regular check-ups to reflect on health issues such as sleep, fatigue, alcohol intake, diet, stress and exercise provides an opportunity to review the most important physical element of training – ourselves.

At a conscious level, we are aware that maintaining friendships, having hobbies and taking well-earned holidays relieve stress. When our schedules allow, we take time to do these things...but subconsciously we tend to relegate them to the bottom of the list when we become stressed. Close friends and family outside of medicine can be good barometers of support by helping you identify when/if you are losing your sparkle or displaying your less charming side in an ever-increasing pattern of anger, irritation or lack of involvement in the rest of your life. Peer group members in anaesthesia are a big support too and socialising with them forms bonds that last. They become our friends, colleagues and informal mentors.

They often have different strengths to us and, if they do something well and easily that you don't (like being organised and logical in study methods), ask how they do it and how you can learn from them. Some people appear to sail through training effortlessly, this is because they put a lot of work into utilising time effectively.

## DO I KNOW MYSELF? HOW DO I RESPOND TO STRESS?

How we deal with stress and whether we care for and monitor ourselves physically and mentally is largely determined by our personality. Within each personality are great strengths (conscientiousness, agreeableness, ability to be assertive); though unfortunately, many individuals experience their less productive traits (neuroticism, low self-esteem) and the resultant defensive behaviour when under stress. These can cause unconscious self-sabotage. The smart, friendly and gregarious trainee whose low self-esteem and need to be liked may defend vehemently against thinking for themselves and taking on responsibility. Over time, they may be judged by others as lacking in decision-making skills and failing to be an assertive advocate for safety. Being aware of how we respond to difficult situations and seeking honest feedback can be an essential step in coping with stress.

## HOW DO I STAY MOTIVATED?

Though trainees are all aiming at the same target, we each have different motivations and needs. We are motivated by, and need recognition of, ourselves as well-intentioned people, for a job well done, for using our time effectively, the relevance of what we do and appreciation of our role in a team. For some, having fun and social interaction is an essential need and, when denied this, motivation lags and stress behaviour develops. Recognising what our particular needs are and making sure those needs are met keeps our batteries topped up. So ask yourself this – what do I need to stay motivated?

## WHAT CAN I LEARN FROM OTHERS?

Understanding both our strengths and those areas where improvement is required is something we can address through having a mentor. A mentor/mentee relationship can be made either through a formalised scheme, or by selecting one yourself. This relationship can help you in maintaining perspective and balance. Mentors support with feedback and guidance through training and with recalled experiences that demonstrate the wisdom of humility in glory, self-forgiveness in disaster and maintaining persistence and purpose throughout life's inevitable ups and downs.

## WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE?

The wellbeing of anaesthetists is a primary concern of the ASA and ANZCA, both in training and throughout professional life, whether in public or private practice, and they support research and projects that encourage and inform a healthier profession.

The Welfare of Anaesthetists Special Interest Group was formed to highlight and support the health and wellbeing of anaesthetists by providing online assistance through the ANZCA website and guiding trainees to independent, non-judgemental resources (doctors' health programs, beyondblue etc.) that are available to enhance self-care and professionalism. Special Interest Group conferences each year focus on wellbeing, with activities that teach stress-reducing techniques like mindfulness and meditation. Courses to learn about ourselves and stress responses are available on the ANZCA website under the 'Events' section.

### References

1. Sexton R. Doctors need a doctor. *MIGA Bulletin*. August 2012.
2. Nyssen AS et al. Occupational stress and burnout in anaesthesia. *Br J Anaesth*. 2003 Mar;90(3):333-337.