

'HOW TO STAY WELL AND MAINTAIN PEAK PERFORMANCE'

Consider for a moment the support team which surrounds the peak-performers in our society. It is common to see a blend of coaches, physiotherapists, masseurs, doctors, financial advisors, managers, personal trainers, media advisers, mentors or legal advisers helping the high-achievers.

Peak performers in business, sport, science, research and politics rely on such support to sustain and excel at executive level, much like the numerous ropes that support a tent.

Doctors can be self-reliant to the point where such supports may be regarded as unnecessary. They may prefer their individual success to be attributable to their own efforts. The idea of a 'personal assistant' is therefore foreign to some doctors but a 'given' necessity in the business world.

On a physiological level, the busy quest for peak performance may disallow doctors from attending to their most basic needs. Maslow's hierarchy suggests that our requirements of fresh air, water, food, sunlight, sleep and exercise must be met before we set out on our quest to excel!

An honest reflection on your diet today may emphasise this point!

Yet, it is common for doctors to ignore the importance of these daily needs and to work whilst mildly dehydrated, without any sunlight, exercise or regular food intake. Combine this with a lack of sleep and the physiological stressors begin to mount.

Our working environments may also disallow easy access to our basic needs, whether we are in a busy ED, a hectic General practice or on a night RMO roster...

The benefit of exercise, including elevation of mood and anxiety reduction are so well-documented that the question must be asked, "If you are not exercising at least 3 times a week, why not?" It is sobering to reflect on studies that indicate one third of Canadian GPs are overweight, only 1 in 2 consumes a healthy diet and 30% drink alcohol to excessive levels. (Frank, Can Fam Phys, 2009)

Patients expect and deserve to be treated by a doctor who is well. Indeed, it is our professional and personal obligation to not 'let ourselves go'. Healthy doctors are more inclined to recommend their own health lifestyle choices to patients. (Frank 2009) and practice better medicine.

You may recall a classic Marx Brothers movie, where they were riding on a fast-moving train and were only able to arrive at their destination by chopping up the all of wooden carriages to fuel the engine and keep it going. So it may be with doctors.....

With almost 9% of doctors retiring before the age of 60 due to illness, we must avoid becoming a premature 'train wreck' and care for ourselves on a daily basis.

Let's look at a few practical suggestions to arrive at our destination with our carriages intact!

Firstly, it is important to **regain control of our working life**. A lack of control over our workplace and working day is a significant stressor for many doctors, the basis of which is usually inadequate employer support or poor time management as a result of a chronic inability to say "no". This is difficult for caring doctors. Flinders University's Hugh Kearns offers a simple strategy - apply "the 3

'D's" to every request. Decide whether to **Do it** (..I'll do it right now), **Ditch it** (...not my problem) or **Delegate it** (... I know someone else who can help...!). Doctors face a multitude of requests in a day, especially from patients who may 'dump 'their woes and their requests need this approach and the use of delegation to best effect.

Secondly, **time for yourself is critical**. We have all had a passion for medicine and may need to rediscover this passion if it has been lost. Time away from the practice working in another area of medicine can achieve this, or simply "going bush for three days."

We also need a passion outside medicine and I am delighted and amazed by the standard of artistic, literary and musical talent within the profession. Schedule private time to read non-medical literature and allocate separate time to enjoy the lives of your family members and your **non-medical friends**. Let their stories be the focus of your interest.

A pre-commitment to holidays well ahead is wise. It is essential that we all have something positive to look forward to. Discussing your work commitments with your spouse and business partners can add a valuable independent perspective. Sit down with the open diary open, listen, plan and be selfish!

Thirdly, Prof.Geoff Riley suggests that **four existential issues** are worthy of our attention.

- **Love** - have someone to care about.
- **Work** - have something meaningful to do (this can mean changing jobs in order to rediscover the lost passion for medicine and what motivates you)
- **Hope** – always have something to look forward to.
- **Freedom** – have a sense of control over your life.

Fourthly, Steven Covey recommends regularly **paying attention to the many roles we have in life**, - as a son or daughter, a parent, spouse, a doctor, mentor, partner, friend, coach, teacher, committee member,etc and to avoid the role of 'doctor' excluding these other important obligations.

Have you fulfilled all of your roles lately? *Life is richer when you do!*

For me, this really what 'work –life balance' is truly about.

Doctors Health SA

If these and other measures fail and you know you are unwell, it is essential to seek confidential and professional formal medical care. This can be difficult. If a colleague is clearly troubled, and we all know of someone like this, advocate for them and recommend they seek formal medical advice as well.

The advent of Doctors' Health SA will make it easier to find a suitable GP with whom you can discuss your circumstances. The benefits of having a GP who can

- advocate for you in the health system and
- offer an independent opinion and advice
- provide timely access to appropriate referral networks

is under-appreciated. It is an enormous comfort to be in the hands of a trusted, confidential medical professional.

The establishment of Doctors' Health SA at 327 South Terrace this year will offer a confidential point of referral for doctors-without-a-doctor and for a 'struggling' colleague or a doctor whose GP has retired! It will offer a reinvigorated phone advisory service, a website for on-line appointments and a network of experienced GPs who have undertaken the program training curriculum and are able to see you as a patient in their private practices.

The program will seek to improve the health of the profession, to reduce impairment, increase health screening, reduce inappropriate self- medication and encourage all doctors to have timely access their own GP. Your ideas and input will be very welcome.

This uniquely South Australian initiative will commence clinical services from March 2012.