# Editorial Physician Suicide: A Growing Concern?

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Editor

150 years. It has been known since the last 150 years that physician suicide is a growing concern, that those responsible for the provision of medical care, are themselves at an increased risk of committing suicide. Exact numbers are not known, not even in the developed world, let alone developing third world countries like ours. Although physicians globally have a lower mortality risk from cancer and heart disease relative to the general population (presumably related to knowledge of self care and access to early diagnosis), they have a significantly higher risk of dying from suicide, the end stage of an eminently treatable disease process.

Suicide is almost invariably the result of untreated or inadequately treated depression or other mental illness that may or may not include substance or alcohol abuse, coupled with knowledge of and access to lethal means.Depression is at least as common in the medical profession as in the general population, affecting an estimated 12% of males and up to 19.5% of females.Depression is even more common in medical students and residents, with 15-30% of them screening positive for depressive symptoms.

The stigma associated with depression in almost all cultures, seems to be greatly magnified among medical practitioners and thus self reporting likely underestimates the prevalence of the disease in medical populations. Though physicians seem to have generally heeded their own advice about avoiding smoking and other common risk factors for early mortality, they are decidedly reluctant to address depression, a significant cause of morbidity and mortality that disproportionately affects them.

Now, coming to our part of the world, where any psychological illness is already stigmatized to the extent of warranting an exorcism, a mental illness afflicting a medical practitioner is something no one ever talks about. In general, a doctor who falls ill himself, is deemed as unfit to treat anyone else. And so, physician suicide is virtually unheard of in our country.

Physicians work long hours, and here in Pakistan, they mostly work in deplorable conditions, having to tend to a large number of patients with meagre resources at their disposal. And more often than not, they remain unable to cater to and save all patients that show up for treatment. At times, these conditions, the feeling of helplessness that most doctors feel at such incidents, chips away at their sanity. And slowly having your sanity, your humanity, your conscience chipped away at leads to depression, which is the most common cause of suicide among physicians. And Physicians are demonstrably poor at recognizing depression in patients, let alone themselves. Furthermore, they are notoriously reluctant to seek treatment for any personal illness. This holds especially true in the case of potential mental illness.

More often than not, colleagues are reluctant to pick up on signs of depression among each other. Over here, let’s just go over the few warning signs, we, as physicians, should all be on the lookout for.

1. Talking about or making plans for suicide
2. Expressing hopelessness about the future
3. Displaying severe/overwhelming emotional pain or distress
4. Showing worrisome behavioral cues or marked changes in behavior, particularly in the presence of the warning signs above. Specifically, this includes significant:
* Withdrawal from or changing in social connections/situations
* Changes in sleep (increased or decreased)
* Anger or hostility that seems out of character or out of context
* Recent increased agitation or irritability

I believe I have gone on long enough now, so as a conclusion, I would like to end this by imploring all healthcare professionals out there to look out for each other, to have each other’s backs. We look out for everyone else, but at times when we need it most, we might not have anyone looking out for us, let’s try not to let that happen. The next time a colleague tries to reach out to us, why not lend a hand, be there for that person, God knows, that might be the one thing that brings that person back from the dark abyss he might be in. Let us all strive not to be strangers, especially to the physicians, the healthcare professionals around us.