

NIHR Greater Manchester PSTRC

Plain English Publication Summary

Publication: [Investigating the links between diagnostic uncertainty, Emotional Exhaustion and turnover intention in general practitioners working in the United Kingdom](#)

Publication details (Vancouver format)

Zhou AY, Hodkinson A, Hann M, Grigoroglou C, Ashcroft D, Esmail A, Chew-Graham CA, Payne R, Little P, de Lusignan S, Cheraghi-Sohi S. Investigating the links between diagnostic uncertainty, Emotional Exhaustion and turnover intention in general practitioners working in the United Kingdom. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*. 2022 Jul 26.

What are the most important findings/conclusions in this paper? Why are they important?

In our study, almost a third of General Practitioners (GPs) told us that they frequently face diagnostic uncertainty in their clinics. Diagnostic uncertainty is when an accurate diagnosis of a patient's health problem cannot be made.

When we compared GPs who frequently face diagnostic uncertainty versus those who did not, GPs who frequently experienced diagnostic uncertainty were more likely to feel exhausted (which is a feature of burnout), unhappy with their jobs and want to leave their job roles.

We also found that GPs who regularly attended work unwell were more likely to feel exhausted, unhappy with their jobs and want to leave their job roles.

What did you do?

We asked 70 different General Practices in England to take part. We asked GPs in these practices to complete a short 10-question survey between December 2019 and March 2020. There were 3 questions about the GP, covering diagnostic uncertainty, how happy they were with their jobs, whether they have attended work unwell, thoughts about leaving their job, and their work-life balance. There were 2 questions on burnout, which is an outcome of chronic work stress.

Afterwards, we analysed our results to look for links between the different survey questions and with information about the GP practices such as size and region.

Why did you conduct this research?

Diagnostic uncertainty has been linked to medical errors that can negatively affect the quality of patient care and increase healthcare costs.

Although GPs may commonly face diagnostic uncertainty in their clinics, very few research studies have looked at how diagnostic uncertainty is linked with other important factors that affect GPs' quality of life outcomes. These outcomes include how happy they are in their jobs, whether they want to leave their job and whether they are experiencing burnout. Having this information can contribute to what is already known. Also, understanding these links can help us identify which areas to focus on in the future.

What was known before your paper was published?

Burnout can result from chronic work stress and GPs have been found to experience high levels of burnout. Different factors have been linked to burnout in doctors but one factor, diagnostic uncertainty, is particularly relevant to GPs. Diagnostic uncertainty occurs when doctors struggle to provide an accurate explanation about a patient's health. This can commonly occur in GP clinics, as GPs are usually the first port of call in the patient journey. Diagnostic uncertainty has been linked to medical errors and this can harm patients, affect the quality of patient care and increase healthcare costs.

What is next? What is the potential impact of the work in this paper? What will change as a result of this paper (or the study it describes)?

We found links between diagnostic uncertainty, exhaustion (which is a feature of burnout), how happy GPs are in their job and thoughts about leaving their job. This highlights the need to include action plans and solutions that can help reduce diagnostic uncertainty in GPs.

We also found that regularly going into work unwell was linked with exhaustion, how happy GPs are in their job and thoughts about leaving their role. There is a need to come up with action plans to change GPs' thoughts around taking sick leave and looking after their own health.

Does this paper link in to a particular study / project? If so, please summarise the study and explain how this paper has improved understanding, or will move the study forward.

This paper is part of a larger study that looks at burnout in GPs and factors that can affect patient safety.

The project contains multiple parts including finding out what factors are linked to GP burnout, how different levels of burnout affect patient safety, and finding out the link between GPs wanting to leave their role and burnout.

The study will help us understand the links between patient safety and burnout in GPs. This can help future work on how to design action plans to reduce burnout in GPs and reduce the number of GPs leaving the NHS.