

Is Working Part-Time a Solution to Work-Life Balance?

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Attaining optimal work-life balance is important for all professionals, especially physicians. In the past, attention to the issue has focused on extremes of imbalance, namely burnout, impairment, depression, and suicide. The literature seemingly assumes physicians will be unwell, with the consideration being only to what degree.

Recently, the work-life balance focus has started to shift toward resilient, non-burned-out physicians and their strategies for success.¹ In *JGIM* this summer, Strong and colleagues explored barriers to work-life balance among successful physician researchers and their mentors.² The move in this direction is welcome, but it is only a start.

Education on work-life balance in medicine is sorely lacking. The Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) mentions physician self-care only once in the requirements for internal medicine training programs. The instruction to trainees states that, "patient needs... supersede self-interest."³ With this lack of emphasis on work-life balance during training, physicians generally receive very little instruction on the topic. Young physicians do not learn tools to create symmetry in their personal and professional lives. They are left to learn from their mentors, who may or may not be the best examples of achieving balance. Physicians are often left to create their own solutions. For many, especially women, this leads to working part-time.

Part-time physicians are reported to have lower burnout scores, more job satisfaction, and a higher sense of control over work compared to full-time colleagues.⁴ At the same time, professional performance and

success are significantly different for part-time physicians. Academic faculty working part-time are more likely to be on a clinician or clinician-educator track and less likely to report academic support or protected research activities.⁵ While these are not the only markers of success, they are of high impact for advancement and promotion in academic settings.

This is the era of *Lean In*. Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer for Facebook, is encouraging women everywhere to lead in their professional lives. She asks women to step up, to be involved, and to succeed.⁶ Her message is reaching hundreds of thousands of women and its immediate, astronomic popularity suggests the concept is welcome. Yet part-time physicians seem to be doing just the opposite. With limitations on their professional time, part-time physicians are basically leaning out. Or are they?

The choice to be a part-time physician can be a difficult one. Rather than achieving balance, part-time physicians often straddle home and work life with a sense of being unable to devote full energy and ability to either one. At the same time, part-time physicians have the privilege of a rewarding clinical practice while personally being present for children or other needs at home. This split identity requires intention, boundary setting, and a conscious effort toward gratitude.

Part-time positions are only one option for those striving toward balance between work and life. Limiting time at work comes with gains and costs, which are applicable to all physicians. Focus at both work and home is paramount. Work must be completed in the time allotted, and staying indefinitely is not an option.

Being present at home is equally important. Attention should only be drawn back to work when absolutely necessary (i.e. call). All physicians must "lean in" when possible and where its impact is greatest; the rest should be let go. While you might delay your advancement or opportunities, applying and ensuring your own values at home is probably worth the trade-off.

With education and tools introduced during training, physicians could achieve better balance regardless of their full-time-equivalent status. Part-time might be the answer, but limiting time is probably closer to the solution. Physicians need to be taught and mentored in this practice. The medical culture also needs to change to allow for its emphasis. With proper mentoring and guidance, true balance will be within reach.

References

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continued on page 2

NEW PERSPECTIVES

continued from page 1

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