

DEMANDS AND REWARDS ASSOCIATED WITH WORKING IN PEDIATRIC ONCOLOGY: FINDINGS FROM A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Background: Research in adult oncology indicates that staff members are at risk for burnout, yet extremely limited information is available on stress and burnout among pediatric oncology staff¹. Preliminary evidence suggests that working in pediatric oncology may place additional and unique demands not encountered in the adult setting¹. In order to devise appropriate and effective interventions to support staff, a better understanding of the demands and rewards associated with working in pediatric oncology is required.

Purpose: This study is part of a larger collaborative effort, led by researchers in the UK, to develop a questionnaire that can be used to measure demands and rewards associated with working in pediatric oncology. The aims of this POGO-funded feasibility study are to identify demands and rewards experienced by Canadian pediatric oncology doctors, nurses, social workers and child life therapists and to compare findings with similarly collected information from pediatric oncology staff working in England.

Methods: We interviewed 4 oncologists, 4 nurses, 3 social workers, and 3 child life specialists from pediatric oncology centres in Ontario using a semi-structured interview guide. Staff members were asked to describe all possible sources of work-related demands (i.e., things which staff find difficult, upsetting, annoying, challenging or a hassle) and rewards (i.e., events or situations that staff experience which they find satisfying or fulfilling). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. NVivo 8 software was used to organize and code data. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis in order to identify all possible sources of demands and rewards.

Results: Work-related demands were described by staff for each of the following themes: relating with children and their families (especially complex families such as divorced or immigrant families); providing cancer care (in particular to children who have relapsed or are palliative); working within a multidisciplinary team (communication issues, conflicting opinions); workload (hours worked, balancing responsibilities); and the physical environment (lack of separate space to speak privately with families or for teenagers). An important finding is that despite the demands, individuals working in pediatric oncology find their jobs highly rewarding. Work-related rewards were described as including the following themes: relating with children and their families (getting a smile or a 'high five', building relationships and memories with families); providing cancer care (watching children respond to treatment, saving a child's 'whole' life); learning new things all the time; being part of a multidisciplinary team (support structure, huge knowledge reservoir); and opportunities for personal growth (learning what is really important in life).

Discussion: Developing a questionnaire that measures both positive and negative aspects of working in pediatric oncology will provide insight into what it is like for individuals working in this field. Such a tool could be used to investigate and understand reasons why some staff experience burnout while others do not.

Reference:

1. Mukherjee S, Beresford B, Glaser A, Sloper P. Burnout, psychiatric morbidity, and work-related sources of stress in paediatric oncology staff: a review of the literature. *Psychooncology*. 2009; Feb 18. [Epub ahead of print].

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