

Chronic stress in general practitioners and practice assistants

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Background: Although many general practitioners (GPs) as well as practice assistants (PAs) complain about stress, no studies addressed chronic stress in both professional groups simultaneously.

Research question: This study analyzes the distribution of chronic stress in GP practice teams.

Method: This cross-sectional study in 181 general practices measured chronic stress (strain due to stress for ≥ 3 months) with the validated psychometric 12-item screening-scale TICS-SSCS. Using the sum score (0-46) and the respective 75th percentiles as cut-offs (PAs > 23 , female GPs > 23 , male GPs > 19), each participant was categorized into low or high chronic stress. The proportions of participants with high stress were determined for the total population and separately for both professional groups. The intra-cluster correlation (ICC) was calculated for the TICS-SSC sum score.

Results: Data of 216 GPs (33.6% females) and 549 PAs (99.1% females) of 136 practices were analyzed. The practice assistant/physician ratio was 2.8 (SD 1.3) in single practices (54 of 136; 39.7%) and 2.4 (SD 1.5) in group practices (82 of 136; 60.3%). 32.1% of single practices GPs and 40.4% of the GPs from group practices had high chronic stress. 42.6% of the PAs from single practices and 52.5% from group practices had high chronic stress. In single GP practices with a highly stressed physician, 52.9% of the PAs had high stress. In group practices with ≥ 1 highly stressed physician, 67.7% of the PAs had high stress. On practice level, 23.4% of the practice members had high stress. We observed an ICC of 0.39 for all PAs and of 0.51 for GPs in group practices.

Conclusions: Chronic stress in GPs and PAs was more prevalent in group than single practices.

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