

Title

Psychological distress, burnout and personality traits in Dutch anaesthesiologists –
Correspondence

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Dear Editor,

We have read the article “Psychological distress, burnout and personality traits in Dutch anaesthesiologists”¹, recently published in European Journal of Anaesthesiology and we must congratulate the authors on their work and efforts to raise awareness on burnout in anaesthetists. We would like to come forward with some contributions, as it is in line with the current work we are developing.

Although burnout as an overall research topic has been present in anaesthesia journals for more than a decade, it continues to be a problem without an effective solution. A recent Shanafelt publication² seems to confirm this, showing that burnout is increasing towards epidemic levels with potential implications for society in general, and anaesthesia is no exception.

Interestingly enough, the Van der Wall et al. article presents a prevalence of burnout in Dutch anaesthetists lower than published results from other countries^{2,3}. This raises the question: are Dutch anaesthetists more resilient or are their organizations more adequate, and thus preventing them from developing higher levels of burnout? It would be worthwhile to perform a multicentre study in different countries to explore which are the characteristics of the countries with the lowest percentage of burnout. This research may in turn reveal important factors for burnout management, which depends not only on organizational factors but also on individual factors. The multiple organizational measures that have been widely suggested to be implemented appear not to be effective in overcoming this problem. Moreover, anaesthesiology has inherent and unique characteristics that makes it stressful. Studies including specific stressor evaluation in anaesthesia could be promising for a better understanding of true inductors of stress in the daily life of anaesthetists.

Many factors contribute to the vast array of ways in which each individual experiences, reacts and regulates stress. One of these factors are personality traits. Consistent with studies in other areas⁴ Van der Wall et al. found that burnout in anaesthetists is related to neuroticism and drew attention to the fact that personality traits are usually considered stable in time and hard to change.

However, there is now increasing consensus that traits also continue to develop throughout adult life⁵, and personality theory also shifts in that direction. Van der Wall et al. suggest personality testing in the selection of anaesthesia residents to reduce burnout in future anaesthesiologists. As personality traits are not static and can be dynamically influenced by work life, assessing personality traits may be useful in detecting individuals at risk of developing burnout but should not exclude them. Physicians can evolve naturally or using psychological strategies to regulate stress and become good professionals.

Additionally, neuroticism is a rather general, non-specific trait that has been associated with multiple psychopathologies, thus it is not at all surprising its association with burnout. In order to better understand the processes underlying burnout, research should focus on recent more refined constructs, such as self-compassion and mindfulness. These constructs have been also described as personality traits and are emerging as interesting topics for research. Emotional regulation mechanisms are complex and these traits should not be considered independently, but their relative impact should be explored. In fact emotional regulation skills appear to be centrally important in understanding how individuals respond to workplace stressors. These traits, as well as the interventions designed to promote them, seem to enhance better emotional regulation profiles, improving stress outcomes and promoting wellbeing⁶. Standardized programs, such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) have also proved to benefit personality traits of neuroticism⁷.

Determining the differentiated influence of these psychological traits and processes in explaining anaesthetists' stress outcomes is a key step in the development of interventions to improve stress and burnout management. Therefore, in future studies of burnout in anaesthetists, mindfulness and self-compassion traits should be evaluated. Mindfulness and self-compassion based stress reduction programs for anaesthetists need to be evaluated and their impact, not only in professional wellbeing but also in clinical care outcomes.

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