

CARING FOR OUR CARERS

It's ok for a doctor not to be ok



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According to research one can safely state that the most unsafe profession – ironically – in terms of mental health is that of the health professions.

In the USA one doctor dies of suicide every day.¹ It is the highest suicide rate of any profession, with the number of doctor suicides in the USA more than twice that of the general population. Although no specific study

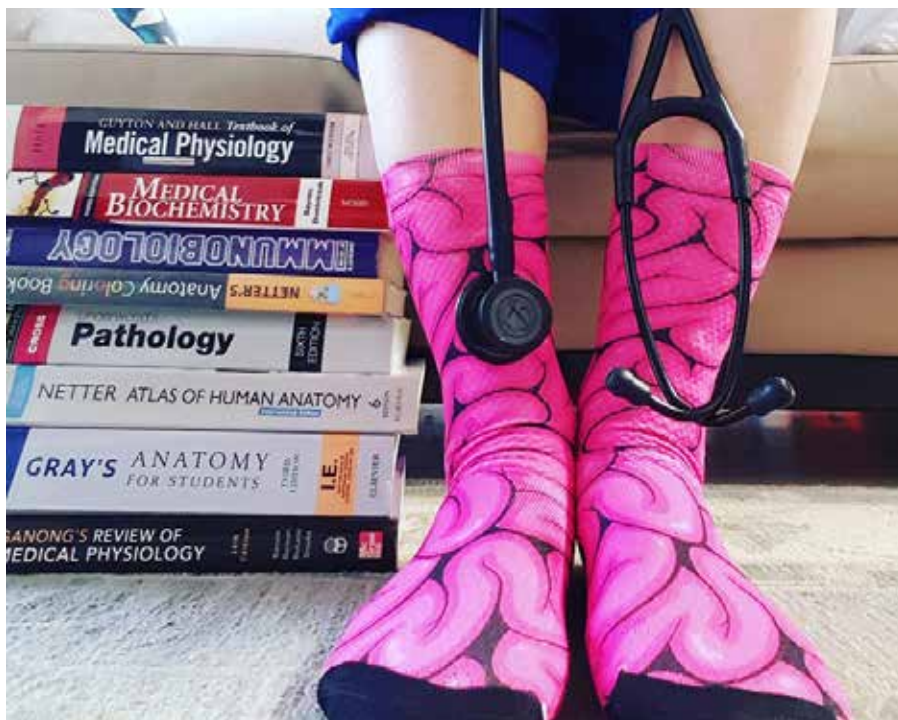
on medical professionals' mental health in South Africa exists, one can surmise that the same crisis among the medical profession exists in our country. In fact, when I sent an article with the title "For doctors with mental illness, 'help me' can be the hardest words"² (on the UK's Practitioner Health Programme [PHP] that is failing), to local health professionals, the response was unanimous: In South Africa the situation is much

worse, and here we do not even have a PHP to support the medical profession.

According to Professor Lourens Schlebusch, pre-eminent South African suicidologist, various studies found that medical doctors, dentists, psychiatrists and psychologists were more likely to die of suicide compared to the general population.

One doctor who literally started to walk the talk through wearing mismatched socks, was Australian cardiologist Dr Geoff Toogood who started the CrazySocks4Docs Day (CS4D). He has lived with both depression and anxiety and faced stigma and discrimination at many levels, but was determined to create awareness to break the deadly cycle that so many of his colleagues faced around the world.³ He wanted "to make it ok for a doctor not to be ok". Medical professionals face the full range of mental health issues, from anxiety and depression to burnout.⁴ Indeed, doctors "are leaving the profession in droves or struggling under inhuman expectations and enormous emotional, legal and paperwork burdens". According to one study, one in five doctors has depression and one in four has thought about suicide – and one in 50 has tried.





The Ithemba Foundation,⁵ a non-profit organisation with the public benefit goals of public education around mental illnesses as biological, clinical illnesses, and to support research, informally promoted CS4D in June last year. It got such traction that it just had to become an official project for 2019, as all evidence showed that those whom we depend on to care for us are suffering in silence. We are immensely grateful to our partners, sock manufacturer Falke and pharmaceutical company Cipla, who immediately saw the need for such a campaign. Medical practitioners, including medical students, need our support – hence our slogan: “Caring for our carers”.

Following on last year’s CS4D Day in June the South African Medical Association’s *Insider* magazine dedicated their July edition to doctors and mental health. In his article, “Depression: Don’t wait until it’s too late!”⁶ psychiatrist Christoffel Grobler, associate professor at Walter Sisulu University, wrote about his own mental ill-health, stressing that “if we

in the medical profession can’t talk about our own mental illness, how can we expect our patients to not be ashamed of theirs, considering all the stigma surrounding the subject?” Globally, statistics drew a dismal picture of the medical profession’s mental health state. A UK survey found that 68% of 116 respondents had depression, a Canadian study that 80% of doctors were suffering from burnout, and in New Zealand mental health problems are nearly three times as prevalent in general practitioners and surgeons than in the general population. It was a case of “ditto” for studies from across the globe, showing an increased prevalence of anxiety, depression and suicidality among medical students and health professionals.

And then, at the end of July last year, yet another tragedy struck. The dean of the University of Cape Town’s Health Sciences Faculty, the bright and brilliant Prof Mayosi Bongani, lost his life to depression.⁷

It clearly was time that we needed to break the silence and the stigma

surrounding mental health and the medical profession. We needed action. One was to literally take the first step by wearing those mismatched CS4D.

We can safely surmise that South Africa’s medical professionals as well as medical students are struggling even more than elsewhere amid inhumane working conditions and extreme trauma situations. Ithemba is therefore extremely grateful to Falke and Cipla, with Falke sponsoring 10 000 mismatched socks for medical students and Cipla 2 000 for medical practitioners, to “care for our carers”. The purpose of CS4D Day is to create awareness around the highly stressful nature of the medical profession, the need for doctors to seek medical help when needed, including mental help, the need for those in the health professions to support one another, the need to reshape the culture of the health industry, and the need for us as patients to support those who care for us – to “care for our carers”.

So, please, let’s put on our odd socks. Let’s walk the talk. Let’s break the silence. Let us help care for you, our carers. You too are only human beings. You too suffer the same illnesses as we do, including from those above the neck – the ones that we try to hide, but that eventually catch up with us if we do nothing.

Please, doctor, or sister, therapist, or nurse – you who are reading here: encourage your patients and their families to care for you as their family doctor, or medical specialist, or nursing sister, or junior doctor, or, if you are in a training hospital, student doctors. Let’s all wear our fun socks on Friday June 7, join the conversation, and help break the stigma. Let’s care for our carers. Because it’s ok for doctors not to be ok. **MHM**

References available upon request

