



Work-Life Balance Solutions for Physicians—It’s All About You, Your Work, and Others

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The issue of physician burnout has received substantial attention in the medical literature and the workplace. Less attention has been paid to prevention. Work-life balance can be destabilized by both external and internal factors. Although external factors are controlled by employers and institutions, internal factors are under individual control. This commentary aims to help physicians identify and manage realities surrounding professional life so as to achieve overall life balance. We define *overall life balance* as achieving the proper mix of the 3 key life components—work, yourself, and others, enough of the time, to experience a satisfied, meaningful life that fulfills your unique goals.

Work

Medicine is a “profession,” not just a job. It attracts exceptional people with a “calling” to serve the sick. This service includes direct patient care as well as basic and translational research, in which the common goal is to reduce suffering irrespective of culture, religion, and people groups. These features of our profession can easily lead to overwork and imbalance. There are always more patients to care for, more electronic medical records to complete, more research to be done, and more papers and grants to be written. When your work is your passion and you enjoy it, it becomes easy to let other parts of your life slide.

Yourself

Your contentment with life is the most important variable in the life balance equation. Some of your characteristics cannot be changed and require self-acceptance. You cannot choose your DNA, your

birthplace, or the historical era you were born in. However, there are many things you can control. It can be helpful to take a personal inventory of your strengths and weaknesses and your mental, emotional, and spiritual characteristics. Every positive aspect of your makeup taken to the extreme can also be a threat to your overall life balance. You need to know yourself and set up boundaries.

The choice of your medical practice—academic or private—is also important. The decisions made during those crucial years of residency and fellowship will shape the opportunities and threats to achieving an overall life balance. Beyond your ideal job, there may be unique personal situations that will determine where you live and work. You may have physical conditions that affect your workload capacity, a heavy financial debt from medical school, or a visa situation that dictates your practice location. If you select a specific disease of interest, that itself may take you to a location where the opportunities are best.

Your work environment is also important. Do they support “team science” at your institution? Do you have enough trusted colleagues to cover for you when you are away? Do you have to carry a pager after hours? The profession requires a servant attitude, but you are not to be a slave. Avoid institutions that do not understand this and dictate an unreasonable work situation.

Others

If you have “others,” then life is simply “not all about you.” If you have a spouse, then their needs will require consideration. It



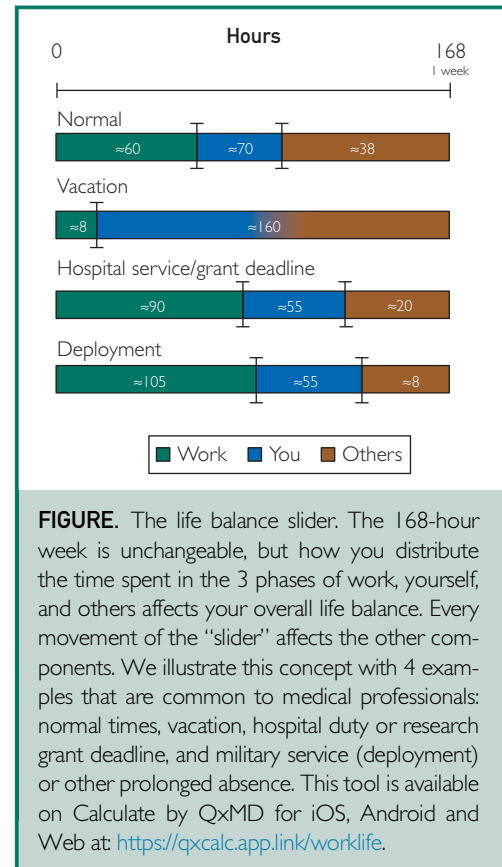
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can sometimes be difficult to find a location where both spouses' professional needs can be met. Children are a beautiful gift, but they have a substantial effect on life balance for both men and women. Childbearing years coincide with the critical time when a woman in any profession is building her career. Both parents are key to the normal developmental success of the child, and although the responsibilities will differ at certain times in the child's development, they must be shared. The beauty of medicine (as opposed to sports, for example) is that with age the experience and wisdom acquired make you more valuable to the institution and patients. Productivity may slow for a few years during the child-rearing period, but will pick up again after the children are launched. It has been said that no one wishes on their deathbed that they had written more papers; rather, many regret the time lost with their children. If you have children, you need to work at an institution that values life balance and accommodates these unique situations.

In addition to children, there may be aging parents that need care. In our society in which families may be widely separated, caring for a loved one can affect life balance. Your first obligation is to your own family. Why would you help everybody else and ignore your own spouse, children, siblings, or parents? Also remember that these "others" such as grandchildren will enrich your life so that your "golden years" will not be your "lonely years."

Achieving Overall Balance

Each of us is given 168 hours per week to divide between work, ourselves, and others (Figure). This 168-hour per week time allotment cannot be altered; thus, any change in the components comes at the expense or benefit to the other components. Gary Keller in his book *The One Thing: The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results* provides a model that particularly applies to issues facing physicians.¹ Keller encourages us to not always aim for perfect "balance," but rather introduces the concept of "counterbalancing." "The idea of counterbalancing



is that you never go so far that you cannot find your way back or stay so long that there is nothing waiting for you when you return."¹ This permits acceptance of situations (Table) in which one component will be out of balance, requiring temporary adjustment of other components. The components can handle these episodes if eventually compensation occurs and balance is restored. We illustrate this concept with 4 common situations in the life of the physician (Figure).

Normal Life. A physician typically spends 60 hours at work or doing work at home. There is mandatory time for sleep, eating, hygiene, and exercise, leaving the remaining time for "others." These amounts are approximate and depend on individual needs. For example, most people need 7 hours of sleep but some need 9 and others 4. You must accept and obey your physiology to be effective. Your work situation may require a long commute, but this can

be turned into leisure if you can relax with a book or music on the train. In contrast, if you are required to drive home in intense traffic, then the commute will be drudgery. The definition of *leisure* and *hobbies* also differ between people. Doing outdoor yard work or cooking is relaxing to some, but draining to others. Pick and choose tasks that enrich your life and outsource the discretionary tasks that you do not enjoy.

Your distribution of a normal life balance changes as you move through the phases of your life. If and when you become married, you naturally will need to invest time into the marriage itself for it to be successful. If children enter the picture, then both partners adjust further and this will usually result in a cutback in the work allotment to maintain overall life balance. Failing to make these adjustments over a long period of time results in stress in the marriage that can lead to chronic dissatisfaction and troubled children. These problems are difficult to solve. Remember, you can adjust the “slider” (Figure) on the 168-hour week but you cannot lengthen the week itself. Any change in 1 compartment always affects the others.

Vacation. Yes, you need to take your vacation. In many academic settings you are not paid extra for working during vacation days, so there is little advantage to not taking vacation. The cell phone and laptop have made it difficult to remove oneself from patient care responsibilities or other work issues. Reading e-mails and taking calls are tempting, but they will disrupt your vacation. For example, if you see that a patient is doing poorly, your paper is rejected (yet again), your grant has been triaged, or there is a new personnel issue, it becomes hard to get those issues out of your mind and relax. It is critical that you have trustworthy colleagues to deal with these issues while you are away.

We realize that medicine can also be a hobby, so there are times when using part of your vacation day to think and write is beneficial. In fact, outdoor activities are oftentimes when ideas sprout. However, you need to be sure that during the vacation you are meeting the needs of the “others”

TABLE. Components of Overall Life Balance Under Normal and Stress Situations	
Work	
Components	Your job at home or work Commuting time Travel for medical conferences
Stressors	Hospital's "on-call" schedule and patient load New boss or department chair Colleague leaves and your load increases New patient electronic medical record is launched Grant deadline and grant fails (more patients) Disease outbreak and natural disaster Military deployment Your focus disease is cured or no longer "hot" Unrealistic clinical productivity goals
You	
Components	Sleep, eat, hygiene, and exercise Health—physical/emotional/spiritual Fulfilling your sense of purpose in life
Stressors	Physical or mental illness Crisis in "others" Burnout Integrity lapse Addiction and loss of medical license Heavy educational debt Financial mismanagement/loss Visa issues
Others	
Components	Spouse and children Friends, neighbors, and colleagues Church, social clubs, and volunteer organizations
Stressors	Death of a loved one Illness in "others"—child or parent or other family member Special needs child Military service in peacetime or conflict Unemployment or merger Divorce or separation Second marriage with new family

and that you rest and restore your physical and emotional batteries so that you can return to work revitalized.

Intermittent Life-Altering Situations. In medicine, it is common to experience periods of time when you will need to “go out of balance.” Examples include hospital service, weekend call, conducting a large laboratory experiment, grant deadlines, adopting a new electronic medical record, or medical travel. Most of these will be limited to several weeks or a month or so at a time. They are necessary to take great care of ill patients or to keep research funded. In these situations, the

“others” suffer the most because of a limited ability to trim personal needs. There are some strategies that can be used to make these times easier for “others.” First, simply explaining ahead of time to your spouse and children that you will need to “work much more the next two weeks while on hospital duty” can go a long way to prepare them for these “out of balance” experiences. Planning ahead and building in vacation days after these busy times to counterbalance can mitigate these disruptions and restore balance. If the “others” know that you are committed to them and will make up for the increase in work later, they will be able to handle these periods easily.

Unusual Situations of Extreme Stress. If you are in the military, then military deployments will necessitate being away from the family for an extended period of time. The time with “others” will be limited to phone calls. Other examples include sudden illness or departure of a colleague resulting in an increased workload for you. Lastly, medical emergencies resulting from a natural disaster or infection outbreak may require a specialist or team to deploy to the disaster area. These unexpected disruptions must be counterbalanced once the crisis is over.

In all these situations, it is useful to realize that you cannot maintain balance all the time. In fact, to achieve greatness you must go out of balance. The key is to anticipate these shifts in the life balance slider and plan for ways to eventually counterbalance.

Why Is This Important? Achieving overall life balance is important not only for you but also for your employer and “others” in your life. How you deal with episodes of imbalance will require “personalization”—developing a plan uniquely suited to you, your work situation, and the “others” in your life that depend on you. Being aware of the factors in the equation early in your career will be extremely helpful in avoiding irreversible mistakes. The novelist James Patterson illustrates this concept as a game in which the contestant (you) is juggling 4 balls labeled “work,” “family and friends” (others), “health” (you), and “integrity.” As

you struggle to keep all balls in the air, you realize that the ball labeled “work” is made of rubber. If you drop it, it bounces back. The other balls are made of glass. Dropping one of these can shatter not only your future but that of others close to you.²

At any one moment, it is difficult to have complete work-life balance, particularly because many of us view medicine as a true calling and have worked hard to achieve our goals. But if you consider the core aspects of a fulfilling medical career, balance is attainable by acknowledging that the bar on the life balance slider can and should be adjusted at various time points. Communicating with others that the balance is being shifted is critical. Although there is no universal solution to maintaining balance, preemptively recognizing the external stressors and adjusting the expectations for yourself and the others in your life will allow you to implement an individualized plan that will fight burnout and loss of control.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This commentary is based on a compilation of thoughts and discussion at the life balance roundtable discussions the authors led for the Lymphoma Clinical Research Mentoring Program (Lymphoma Research Foundation, www.lymphoma.org) over the past 5 years. The authors have both been in academic hematology/oncology for more than 30 years (T.E.W.) and 20 years (S.M.S.), respectively. Both have spouses in the medical field and have raised children.

Potential Competing Interests: Drs Witzig and Smith have received travel from Lymphoma Research Foundation, New York, NY.

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