

The Perils of Perfectionism or How to Become One's Own *Worst Enemy*

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Let me tell you a true story... Dr. Jonathan Drummond-Webb was a rising star in the field of paediatric Canadian surgery. With degrees from some of the most prestigious universities, he held positions of great responsibility and was the Congenital and Paediatric Surgery Chair. One Boxing Day, after years of professional success, he committed suicide. He was 45. Did certain aspects of Dr. Drummond-Webb's personality contribute to his death?

WE ARE LIVING IN A SOCIETY which loves and values excellence, especially in medicine. We congratulate and admire our colleagues who achieve exceptional performance. Doctors have certain personality traits which allow them to perform superior quality work, and that is how it should be.

However, while it is important to recognize and honour physicians who, through hard work and determination, have achieved great things, we should also look at the consequences of this quest and this constant show of excellence.

A doctor who is a perfectionist needs to be or appear perfect. He is perseverant, meticulous and organized. He upholds sometimes unrealistic standards and tends to judge himself and those around him in the event of a failure.

According to Canadian psychology researchers Paul Hewitt and Gordon Flett¹, personality is at the root of many stress-related health problems¹. Perfectionism is a personality trait that makes people more vulnerable to stress and less able to handle it.

In the next few pages, I would like to help perfectionist physicians to stop feeling guilty and instead reap all the benefits of this personality trait. Perhaps, by understanding how we operate, we can learn to live better and happier...

Is there a typical personality?

People go into medicine for many reasons, mainly because of an interest for science, for a desire to help others or based on family influence. In other cases, social status, prestige or the need to have a fulfilling life are behind the choice. Whatever the initial motivation, one thing is clear: high intellect is a prerequisite for entering medicine. Add to this intense motivation to get through medical

studies and, later, to work the many required hours.

Of course, doctors are all different; however, they commonly share certain traits, in a higher proportion than in the general population. Perfectionism, which also exists in other professions, is widespread in doctors. We will look at how this trait can sometimes turn against us.

TEXT BOX

Impostor Syndrome

You regularly succeed in what you do. People praise your talents and skills. Your colleagues and patients are happy with your work. But, in spite of it all, you constantly feel you are deceiving others. They'll probably end up realizing that you know nothing, that you are not as competent as you seem. The phenomenon of chronic doubt is relatively common, and exists not only with what a person does, but also with who he is. A person suffering from the impostor syndrome has trouble taking credit for his success. He thinks that his success has come through pure luck, and not because of his intelligence or talent. He believes that, sooner or later, he will be unmasked.

Where does perfectionism come from?

Perfectionism, which pushes us towards excellence, is highly encouraged and valued in society, especially in medicine. However, there is a difference between wanting to excel and wanting to be perfect.

The quest for perfection can prove painful, since it is often due to a desire to do well, and the fear of making a mistake. So the quest for perfection is not always as desirable as one might think.

Are we born perfectionists?

For a few years now, the controversy has raged on over the origin of personality. Countless scientific studies aim to prove that many personality traits have been in fact inherited from our ancestors. Theories suggest that a child's personality is then slowly shaped through interaction with his parents and other important people in his life.

Parental Influence

Many perfectionists are raised by parents who, directly or indirectly, have led them to believe that they are not good enough. As children, they received conflicting messages, mixing praise and criticism, such as "That's good, but I am sure you can do better" (in other words, it's not good enough). Clinical work with perfectionist doctors often reveals that they were convinced when they were young that they were not worth much or not loved enough. The pursuit of perfection is a potential way of reacting to poor self-esteem.

Environmental Influence

Medical culture encourages perfectionism, which contributes to its deep rooting. In our role as caregiver, we have the impression of living in a setting that requires us to be perfect, which puts an enormous amount of pressure on us. "Doctors must practice exemplary medicine, given they can be sued³." Legal medicine reinforces the idea that someone must be held accountable for any complications. However, some diseases cannot be cured, and certain complications cannot be avoided. Therefore, we can understand that anxiety can result from the fear of making a mistake.

Perfectionism comes in different forms. In broad terms, there is self-oriented perfectionism, which involves requiring oneself to be perfect. Then there is perfectionism oriented towards others, which is when people demand perfection from the people around them². Each type of perfectionism inherently carries its own problems, and both types are often found in one person.

In both cases, perfectionists are often faced with the same situation: their expectations are too high and impossible to realize without either themselves or others coming off badly.

In self-oriented perfectionism, the person will often tend to question and doubt himself. Lack of confidence which leads to caution may also prevent sharing one's more original ideas for fear that they will be rejected or that one's colleagues will criticize them. By not saying anything, however, he ends up alone in his corner².

If one's standards are too high, it can slow down progress at work, or even prevent a person from meeting a deadline. Procrastination may even set in, since the task appears to be insurmountable. This situation may lead to failures, simply because the inordinate attention to detail prevents one from finishing work on time. *Are the*

trees making you lose sight of the forest? One may also suffer from the impostor syndrome⁴ (*textbox*).

Conversely, **in perfectionism oriented towards others**, the person is often disappointed with and exasperated by the behaviour of the people around him. He is a self-appointed quality auditor, and cannot drop this role even outside work. This tendency can make relationships with those around him strained, since work colleagues or family members are never good enough. Certain actions by other people upset or disappoint him. It is possible that he expects more from others than they can reasonably give².

Studies seem to indicate that, when faced with stressful situations, the perfectionist oriented towards others is less likely to become depressed or anxious as the self-oriented perfectionist. However, he has more problems getting along with others, whether at home or at work.

Why could perfectionism cause more damage in medicine than in other fields?

The problem is that people demand ever more from doctors professionally. They have to do more, faster, with fewer resources and constantly adapt to all types of changes. In addition, doctors' personal lives are often rather complicated. In the end, schedules are becoming more and more difficult to manage.

The doctor can also see that the more he does, that more is expected of him. And it's true! As a reaction to the constant pressure around them, doctors who never complain when they work often find themselves faced with a bigger load. Colleagues know they can "take it", that their work will be well done, and that patients will be satisfied. The doctor also tends to put off fun and vacations. Any time spent taking care of himself may be interpreted as his neglecting his patients. And given the medical staff shortages, there will always be someone needing care.

With more than 20 years of research, psychologists Paul Hewitt and Gordon Flett observed that perfectionists live in a constant state of stress, which leads to emotional, physical and relationship problems, including depression, food disorders, marital conflicts, and even suicide¹. They also saw that perfectionists were more prone to depression when faced with stressful events, especially when they believe that they are not equal to the task.

It can be said that the convictions of perfectionists can only end up in disappointment, since perfection is not of this world or it is at the very least very difficult to attain.

The emotional repercussions are legion: the fear of making mistakes, the stress brought on by the desire to succeed, embarrassment from both lack of confidence and self-doubt.

In addition, there can be tension, exasperation, disappointment, anger, sadness and fear of humiliation. This is how perfectionism can become excessive. We are far from the quest for excellence (table).

However, perfectionists are greatly appreciated at work. They make excellent doctors, as long as they do not get lost in the details, which can mean lost time and reduced efficiency. They are good workers. Their attention to detail is useful in making the right diagnosis and prescribing the best treatment. Therefore, perfectionist standards have their place. Attention to detail increases the final quality of the work, and good organizational skills improve service efficiency. By requiring a lot of ourselves, we can improve our performance. By expecting a lot from others, we increase their confidence in their abilities and encourage them... as long as we do not fall into our own trap.

TABLE

Perfectionism becomes a problem when...

- It prevents you from succeeding
- It prevents you from being happy
- You never have enough time
- You become bogged down by details, which slows down your work
- You are unable to set priorities
- You live in fear of making mistakes or being humiliated
- It causes emotional turmoil
- It leads to tension in your interpersonal relationships

The compulsive triad: a necessary evil?

In *The Physician as Patient*, Myers and Gabbard talk about a compulsive triad in doctors⁵. This triad is made up of chronic doubt, guilt feelings and an exaggerated sense of responsibility.

An example of chronic doubt that we often see in our doctors' offices are doctors who are respected by their colleagues and patients and yet still doubt their skills. They had doubts right at the start of their career, and, over time, they fear they have lost the knack.

Self-doubt is not necessarily a bad thing. It allows us to correct a diagnosis that could be erroneous or to readjust a treatment that proves ineffective. Doubt makes us more meticulous and prevents us from acting rashly or from making many bad decisions. However, during all stages of a medical career, the well-being of the physician can be affected by chronic doubts. He will also have problems making decisions since he is afraid of making mistakes. He could also develop a defensive medical practice, which is not necessarily

beneficial for his patients. Chronic doubt is a double-edged sword since, in spite of the fact that it is generally positive for patients, it is behind the chronic anxiety and permanent worry of doctors.

As for guilt feelings, some doctors feel responsible for any complication or non-compliance with a treatment. If a patient has not done what was recommended, it must be because the doctor did not give clear enough instructions or did not insist enough. The doctor can only make recommendations; patients also have responsibilities and must cooperate in the treatments.

It is normal to feel guilty from time to time. It is needed for developing and applying moral judgement. Through guilt, we can feel regrets, empathy and respect for others. We should feel guilty if we have the desire to deliberately hurt others. The problem is having guilt feelings when we have no power over the situation. This feeling becomes omnipresent and eats away at everyday life. We can imagine the devastating effect that a complaint or lawsuit, founded or not, can have on a doctor with this personality trait.

The same goes for those who feel an exaggerated sense of responsibility. If a colleague says to you, "I saw one of your patients in Emergency. She suffered acute pulmonary oedema!" What's your first reaction?

Many would react with "What did I do wrong?" Professionalism of course requires a major sense of responsibility and high ethics. However, some doctors are so conscientious that they sometimes do more for their patients than the patients do for themselves. We must also keep in mind that a large part of medicine is palliative, and that many complications cannot be prevented.

Getting back to Dr. Drummond-Webb

This brilliant Canadian surgeon unfortunately ended his career by killing himself. Fortunately, this was an exception. We will never know what actually contributed to Dr. Drummond-Webb's suicide. However, one of his colleagues described him as a man haunted by his weaknesses. All his successes and accomplishments could not make up for his occasional fruitless attempts to save a child in distress. He never felt good enough. It is also possible that he had personal problems or suffered from undiagnosed depression. However, Dr. Drummond-Webb's perfectionism and doubts are traits often seen in doctors and could be a source of concern even in people who will never end up killing themselves.

THE RELENTLESS QUEST for perfection is full of consequences for doctors. Many maintain unrealistic expectations and set extremely high personal standards for themselves. Perfectionism no longer means the search for excellence, but rather the quest for the unattainable and inaccessible. We clearly see a drop in performance

among perfectionists. Some even end up abandoning medicine or clinical work.

Health troubles frequently arise over the years. These doctors can also develop major anxiety problems leading to difficulties concentrating. Their work becomes more difficult and less efficient. In the end, it's the doctors and their mental health that suffer.

Perfectionist attitudes and behaviours are not easily changed. The most appropriate preventive approach may first be becoming aware of the harmful aspects of this extreme personality trait in current medical practice and take the correct steps to take good care of oneself and live better.⁹

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