



Lessons of a junior doctor

Taking care and building the foundation for a sustainable career

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The life of an intern and junior doctor is often described as exhausting and relentless, but rewarding. As another year passes, I find myself reflecting on what being a junior doctor has taught me – not just about medicine, but about myself. The more I work, the less I think about the clinical knowledge and technical skills I've gained, and the more I value the quieter, harder lessons – how to look after myself; how to ask for help; and how to stay grounded in a system that can feel overwhelming. What I appreciate more and more is the importance of learning how to sustain yourself within the practice of medicine.

Every January, new interns step into the hospital; lanyards shining, pockets freshly stocked, minds buzzing with protocols and procedures. They're ready to take on the start of their careers and this new step in life with a mixture of excitement, anticipation and nervousness. I remember my first day of intern year vividly, but it also feels like a lifetime of lessons have unfolded since. I think medical schools prepare us well for the medicine we'll encounter, but not as well for how to look after ourselves and others, manage burnout, or sustain wellbeing.

The early days: learning the hard way

Like most new doctors, I started my intern year determined to prove myself. I thought that being "a good doctor" meant being tough – pushing through fatigue, saying yes to every request, finishing every task no matter how long it took, and always staying over time. I equated resilience with endurance. But it didn't take long to realise how unsustainable that was. Long shifts blurred into one another, and even on days off I couldn't switch off the mental to-do list.

There's often an unspoken, quiet pressure in medicine that the harder you work, the more dedicated you are. But somewhere along the way, I began to see that working harder didn't always mean working better. The strategies that truly supported my wellbeing weren't grand or complicated. They were small, consistent habits; the things that slowly built a sense of steadiness amid the chaos.

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Connection with colleagues: No one understands the daily stressors like the people sharing the journey beside you. The endless paperwork, the phones that won't stop ringing, the long list of jobs, and the emotional toll of caring for unwell patients can all add up. What made it manageable were the people beside me. Those quick corridor chats, post-shift debriefs and shared coffees did more for our wellbeing than we initially realised.

Boundaries, rest and self-care: Like many junior doctors, I found this the hardest to learn. I used to feel guilty for taking breaks or finishing on time, as if self-care was something to earn. But the truth is, setting boundaries and looking after yourself doesn't make you less dedicated – it makes your life sustainable. Learning to step away, to sleep, to exercise, or simply to do something completely non-medical that I enjoyed helped me come back stronger, clearer and kinder; both to my patients and myself.

Reconnecting with purpose: On the hardest days, it helped to remember why I chose medicine in the first place. It wasn't for the paperwork or the protocols; it was for the people. Taking a few minutes to sit with a patient and to really connect, reminded me that the heart of this work is human connection. Every doctor has their own different reason for choosing this career. On tough days and during difficult periods, it helps to reconnect with your own purpose.

Unexpected sources of strength: What surprised me most during my intern year was where my strength truly came from. I expected it to come from knowledge, efficiency and competence. Instead, it came from community.



It came from the intern who stayed back to help finish jobs on a hectic afternoon.

It came from the resident who helped me with my notes and offered me kindness during a terrible shift.

It came from the registrar who brought a bag of snacks on a night shift because everyone looked exhausted.

It came from the quiet understanding that we were all figuring it out together; that solidarity, more than stoicism, is what keeps us going.

There's a particular bond that forms between doctors, especially junior doctors. We might work in different departments, but we share the same language of fatigue, laughter and resilience that only those who've been there truly understand. These connections are so valuable. Be that community for your fellow junior doctors; it truly makes a difference.

For the new Interns

To those about to begin their journey, congratulations. You've worked incredibly hard to get here, and you're about to embark on one of the most challenging and rewarding years of your life. Here's what I wish someone had told me:

You won't know everything, and that's OK. Medicine is a lifelong journey. Ask questions, lean on your team. And remember that uncertainty is not failure; it's normal and it's a chance to grow.

Be kind to yourself. You'll make mistakes, feel overwhelmed, and occasionally doubt yourself. That's part of learning. What matters is how you respond. Grow with honesty, humility and care.

Invest in relationships. Your colleagues can be your greatest teachers, allies and friends. Support one another; celebrate small wins together. Nurture your relationships outside of work too.

Take wellbeing seriously. You can't pour from an empty cup. Make time for rest, exercise, hobbies, and connections outside medicine. These aren't distractions; they make your career sustainable.

Reach out early if you're struggling. Hospitals have wellbeing services and dedicated support units for a reason. The Doctors' Health Advisory Service WA (DHASWA) is always there for you with their 24/7 Advice Line. The DHASWA Doctors Access List can help you find a supportive GP. Support is always available and seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Looking back, looking forward

Being a junior doctor has taught me more about myself than any textbook ever could. As well as all the clinical knowledge I've gained, it's shown me that looking after yourself isn't about stepping away from medicine; it's about finding ways to stay in it sustainably.

As I step further into my career, I carry those lessons forward. And to the next group of interns stepping into work for the first time: take a deep breath. You're ready for this and you'll learn more than you can imagine. And when in doubt, remember – you're not alone in this. We've all been there, and we're cheering you on. ■