Letting Ourselves Be Human: A Resident’s Thoughts on Burnout
By Samuel Freeman

Since starting my pediatrics residency a little over a year ago, I have heard many times about physician, and particularly resident, burnout. When the exhilaration of the first few months of residency passed for me some time last winter, I began to feel more tired and less motivated at work. So I wondered, was I burning out already?

We all know what residents go through to get to where they are today: highly competitive admissions processes, demanding work schedules and tremendous social expectations. That’s why medical trainees are now the beneficiaries of wellness programs, improved work hours and a growing awareness in the medical establishment of the need to do things differently when it comes to medical training. In my program at the Montreal Children’s, we are frequently asked by our program directors and chief residents how we are coping with the demands of residency and the stress of dealing with critically ill patients and patient deaths. We are often, as a group and as individuals, reminded that support is available if ever we are feeling discouraged, overwhelmed, or unable to cope with the demands of the job. And yet these offers of help and support have never seemed to cut to the core of my concerns as a resident.

I have no doubt that such efforts to promote resident wellness are for the good, and far preferable to the old “tough love” or “sink or swim” model of resident training made famous to many of us by popular works of fiction like “The House of God”, or “Grey’s Anatomy”. By the same token, it is my impression that most efforts to address resident distress do not go to the root cause of burnout, because they take for granted that everyone who goes into medicine does so for the same reasons. The common archetype, it seems to me, goes something like this: medical students are sensitive perfectionists who assiduously study and master medical science in the classroom before applying that knowledge in the clinical setting. Once they enter the “real world” of medical practice, they are slowly worn down by the realization that they are fallible and often impotent in the face of human suffering, and so they burn out.

What motivates young people to enter the medical profession? Surely many factors come into play, beyond caring and the desire simply to “help others”. I am thinking, for instance, of intellectual curiosity, a passion for medical science (which it is important to distinguish from a passion for patient care), the potential for lifelong learning, the appeal of financial stability, the desire for prestige, and countless other reasons. Some of these motivators strike us as more noble than others, but the reality is that they all, from the most quixotic to the most cynical, come into play. The decision to enter medical school is not always the result of a reflective, deliberate process, born only from good intentions, though of course we all hope it could be so.

In my view, we must expand our idea of what may attract young people to our profession, in order to better understand trainees’ expectations. If we thought about this honestly and with humility, I believe we would reach some surprising conclusions. For one thing, we might realize that burnout is caused not only by high stress events or a few particularly difficult experiences, but also by the daily reality of medical practice. My lowest moments as a trainee have not come from the handful of situations in which I’ve been faced with very sick children or difficult families.

Strikingly, my most difficult moments have come from facing the drudgery of repetitive clerical tasks and from the monotony, on many weeks, of spending more hours in the hospital than outside of it. Becoming a resident has also prompted me, for the first time, to project myself into a future in which I will have to worry about finding a staff position and spend a significant proportion of my time engaged in administrative work. Those experiences and thoughts have led me to feel something I never once felt in medical school: doubt about my career choice. I was warned many times as a medical student that breaking bad news or experiencing the death of a patient would be difficult, but no one warned me that other, more mundane feelings of boredom would come so soon, or at all for that matter. What has made this all the more troubling to me is that I consider
myself to be very happy in medicine, in pediatrics, and in my program. How must residents who are less comfortable with their choices feel?

Why does this matter? Because medical trainees -- and the patients they will come to care for -- will not be served if we forget that they are people with complex desires and conflicting goals and aspirations, who have made many compromises along the way. Nor will they be served if we take for granted that they are all starry-eyed do-gooders whose only ambition is to dedicate themselves completely to their calling. How many medical trainees can become that ideal? And how many will feel inadequate, or become apathetic and cynical, if they fall short of it?

And so we residents must also be able to find inspiration, solace, intellectual satisfaction, and emotional release, from sources outside of medicine: sports, creative pursuits, family, friendship, and falling in love. These are aspects of life that we cannot neglect and must take the time to cultivate. If we do, I believe we will be much happier, healthier physicians.

Can I be a good physician without being a tireless worker-bee and paragon of selfless dedication? That, to me, is the critical question, and one I am still attempting to answer. For now, my moments of doubt and fatigue have passed. But I know that those recent feelings can – and likely will – return. When they do, I will try to accept that they are part of the job and part of life, and that they do not make me a bad physician, or a bad person.

To prevent physician burnout, we must change the way we see our profession and the way we see ourselves as practitioners. We must let ourselves be flawed. We must let ourselves be human.