



WORKAHOLISM, WELL-BEING, AND COMPASSION

It is a relief to finally see a downturn in the number of new COVID-19 cases and deaths. With this improvement, most Europeans are now seeing a progressive relaxing of related restrictions in their countries, but it is debatable whether this is a good thing. By the time this editorial is published, the UK government will have stopped requiring those with COVID-19 to quarantine, and free testing will no longer be available. It is to be hoped that these changes do not result in hospitals overwhelmed with patients again. Health care—ophthalmology in particular—has a massive backlog of patients. Creative ways of managing it are under debate.

With the worst of the pandemic (one hopes) behind us and seemingly no new variant around the corner, many of us are pleased to be getting our lives back in order. This, I expect, means that our professional lives will get busier and many of us will be tempted to work the same long hours we did before the pandemic began and will resume traveling to conferences if we haven't already—all while squeezing in time for family, leisure, and proper holidays. Reflecting on the changes to come made me realize it makes good sense to take a cautious approach to our reentry into *normal* life.

A recent article in the *Harvard Business Review* offered an interesting perspective on work-life balance. The article draws a difference between being a workaholic and working long hours, and it highlights the impact the former can have on our health.¹ Workaholics struggle to detach from work because of both positive and negative characteristics, including ambition, anxiety, guilt, a desire to be important, and an overdeveloped sense of duty. For medical professionals, some of these characteristics may develop in training and through mentorship—sometimes our mentors can set a poor example. Workaholics become stressed by overworking, which causes an increase in cortisol levels and proinflammatory cytokines such as interleukin 6. This in turn can lead to high blood pressure, diabetes, anxiety, depression, and sleep issues. The article referenced draws a line between being a workaholic and working long hours, but neither approach is healthy.

Another article in the *Harvard Business Review* highlights research that suggests working long hours is associated with similar consequences as being a workaholic.² Overworking can result in working less effectively and being less productive. The corollary is that working fewer hours and having predictable time off can improve productivity and creativity.

Combating an obsession with work is not easy. It takes a conscious effort to effect change, and it is probably best

to consider and be motivated by the rewards of doing so. However, creating space even to consider this is hard when we are working long hours. Mindfulness and meditation are wonderful options to optimize our well-being, but they also require time.

A less time-intensive way to try to balance work and life is to consider aspects of humanism and, in particular, compassion—which is the focus of this issue of *CRST Europe*. In my experience, the folly of working long hours and being a workaholic stems from focusing on ourselves and perhaps not having enough consideration for others. To quote from *The Charter for Compassion*, “The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical, and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves.”³

Compassion and empathy are ingrained in us as doctors, and we recognize how well these characteristics work in our interactions with patients. Consider how powerful it would be to use these qualities to benefit and break boundaries for others and ourselves. Many scientific studies have demonstrated the benefits compassion can have on health.^{4,5} I salute those who contributed to this issue. The stories shared are examples of compassion at so many levels.

I wish you all wellness, happiness, and peace in what I hope is a postpandemic world. ■

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