

Letter to the Editor on Addressing Burnout and Mental Health in Surgeons

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**Keywords:** Daily stress, Emotional resilience, Mental well-being, Patient safety, Physical exhaustion

Dear Editor,

Surgery is a very demanding branch of medicine in which many surgeons sacrifice their health, peace of mind, and family life for work, often without personal satisfaction [1]. Surgeons play a crucial role in the healthcare workforce, and their job demands mental well-being, as it directly influences patient safety, sustainability, and the quality of medical services [2]. Compromised mental health among surgeons has been associated with higher rates of medical errors and poorer patient outcomes [3].

Many studies have attributed these to long and irregular working hours, burnout, physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion, prolonged standing coupled with poor ergonomics, lack of other physical activities, decreased resilience, staff shortages, and intensive workload pressure [2,3]. Given the immense daily pressure in the working environment, mental breakdown, emotional and physical exhaustion become prominent because surgeons lack adequate time for recovery [3].

Qi K et al., in their review article, stated that physical activity has been widely recognised for its positive effects on both physical and mental health, including reducing burnout and enhancing resilience in high-pressure professions. Despite being aware of these benefits, many surgeons fail to incorporate physical activity into their daily lives due to prolonged surgeries, frequent night shifts, and unexpected emergencies [4].

Empathising with surgeons helps us understand that their lives are not merely busy, but rather resemble a relentless oscillation every day, often without adequate leave or rest. Nowadays, female surgeons are increasingly occupying what was once considered a male-dominated field, and the pressures they face further contribute to poor mental well-being. As rightly stated by Agharia S et al., in their review article, women in fields such as surgery face gender disparities and sexual harassment [1]. A national survey found

that among female residents, 19.9% face sexual harassment in comparison to 0.9% of their male counterparts. They also face high rates of infertility (32%) and pregnancy complications [1].

Effective measures must be taken to address these concerns and help surgeons overcome them. One such measure is training surgeons to cope with day-to-day stress, as well as ensuring the timely identification of stressors to facilitate recovery rather than masking them as weaknesses [2].

Exercise and other forms of physical activity must be incorporated into their academic curriculum; work schedules must accommodate these activities to boost both physical and mental health [4]. Regular weekly or monthly counselling sessions, along with a 24x7 active helpline, could help provide essential support for surgeons' mental well-being [3].

The mental well-being of a surgeon is a cornerstone of patient safety and not just a personal issue. Primary source of stressors for surgeons is multifactorial. Addressing these issues requires the coordination of individuals (mindfulness, physical activity, and stress management workshops), at an institutional level (flexible schedules, formal mentorship programmes, and confidential mental health services), and, lastly, the policy (health-seeking without fear of professional repercussions).

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AUTHOR DECLARATION:

- Financial or Other Competing Interests: None
- Was informed consent obtained from the subjects involved in the study? NA
- For any images presented appropriate consent has been obtained from the subjects. NA

PLAGIARISM CHECKING METHODS: [Jain H et al.]

- Plagiarism X-checker: May 21, 2026
- Manual Googling: Jun 06, 2026
- iThenticate Software: Jun 09, 2026 (5%)

ETYMOLOGY: Author Origin

EMENDATIONS: 5

Date of Submission: May 06, 2026

Date of Peer Review: Jun 01, 2026

Date of Acceptance: Jun 11, 2026

Date of Publishing: Aug 01, 2026