

Review: *How to balance family with career: A man's perspective*
Christopher D. Shank, MD MBA¹

¹ Department of Neurosurgery, University of Alabama at Birmingham (Birmingham, AL)

* All quotes are from the reviewed article unless otherwise specified.

In their 2016 article, "How to balance family with career: A man's perspective," Drs. Bakhos and Castillo-Sang present their assessment of a hot-button issue: surgeon burnout. The authors make compelling arguments for the causes, effects, and potential solutions to significant burnout in the field of cardiothoracic surgery. For better or worse, many of their points are salient to us, neurosurgeons.

The causes of surgeon burnout are frequent and varied. Like high-level athletes, we are asked to operate at peak performance constantly, with the added bonuses of "public reporting of surgical outcomes and payment for performance" on the horizon. An "aging and sicker population" combined with surgeon shortage increase acuity and require us to face "life and death decisions on a routine basis." Outside our ORs and ICUs we juggle "fulfilling administrative or research responsibilities, meeting deadlines, achieving career goals in promotion and financial peace of mind." While many of us thrive under pressure, burnout occurs when these stressors disrupt our work-life balance to a clinically significant degree.

The effects of surgeon burnout are well-documented: depression, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization of patients, to name a few. Burnout decreases work performance leading to medical errors as well as "a lower sense of gratification and career satisfaction." Burnout can also have negative effects on a surgeon's family and colleagues, damaging the support structure that is key for the emotionally injured surgeon's treatment algorithm. Importantly, burnout appears to affect 40% of surgeons, regardless of practice environment or payment model. The etiology of surgeon burnout, according to the authors, is disorganization leading to a disruption in work-life balance.

"So how can we avoid burnout and achieve work-life balance?" The authors present several suggestions based on the central tenants of self-awareness, foresight, and organization. To this end, we must first recognize the dynamic definition of work-life balance. Appropriate balance varies from surgeon to surgeon, and even within one surgeon at different points in their career. Defining balance "requires some introspection and self-awareness about our goals and priorities." Secondly, we must consciously consider work-life balance when deciding our career path, with respect to practice environment, payment models, choosing partners and mentors, and long-term career plans and aspirations. We should discuss both near and long-term career goals with our families and create realistic expectations up front. Robust (and healthy) coping mechanisms combined with a strong support structure can provide some relief following adverse outcomes. "Celebrating small and large victories at home and work" can offset the lows associated with morbidity and mortality. Perhaps most importantly, we should set aside protected family and personal time. "Maintaining a sense of 'normalcy' or 'sanity' is reinforced by interacting with family and friends outside of medicine."

Burnout and work-life imbalance is a significant, pervasive, but salvageable problem for surgeons. Achieving appropriate work-life balance is a challenging and dynamic task that requires self-awareness, foresight, and organization. "Placing as much weight on being successful at life as in work is key to having a healthy and sane career, and to avoiding early burnout."