

OUTING BURNOUT

Presented Dr Lucy OHagan

lucyohagan@gmail.com

28 July 2017

Presented to RNZCGP Conference Dunedin.

We grow vegetables. My job is to make compost and scatter seeds. I don't know the Latin names of plants so I am not allowed to do real gardening.

I don't like rows, so seeds get thrown into odd shaped spaces, bound by little river stones. We live in a harsh environment, so I like the greens in family gatherings. The coriander col de sac is happy in frost, even tastier, and the spinach just bounces back after a good fall of snow.

They say it is all in the soil. So I have 4 round black bins standing resolutely against the hill. It's a job mixing it all up, brown then green, fresh then dead. Dried prunings, browned off parsley, gone to seed.

The horse shit around us, gets desiccated by the sun, so you have to soak it in a bin of water and stomp on it with gumboots.

The bokashi bucket solid with half rotten vegetables, needs a gloved hand to scoop out a dose for each layer. It all goes in.

The ash from the fire always sticks to the gloves soaked in Bokashi syrup. The syrup is putrid-the stench goes through your gloves, invades your finger skin and splashes up your nose. Apparently this revolting, scummy liquid is good for the garden. Really? In it goes.

And somehow, in some magical way it happens. After weeks of neglect, I lift the lid and there it is, rich brown moist soil. Well to be fair, only in the middle is moist, the edges dry out against the hot plastic. I win though, because the crispy bits on the outside make a nice brown layer in the next bin.

Our garden is a wild huddle behind a rose hedge. The wind that can howl across our narrow island rises up over the stand of roses, over the long verandah, and away. The verandah is still, warm and safe. Everything is close. The family gatherings of greens, the prolific parsley, the perky spinach, the coriander. Close.

Beyond the briar there is a long view. Down the grassy slope, into neighbours' back yards, the old church, the new school. A pastoral moraine.

I lift mine eyes to the hills. And from there, the giant sky, both far away and near.

What on earth has this got to do with burnout? I fear this is going to turn into a nasty cliched metaphor about the cycle of life, growth from shit. But no.

It's simpler than that.

It's just that burnt out brains need to huddle for a while, be near to life that demands nothing.

The burnout soul needs glimpses of the long view, to know that something exists beyond, but also protection from the gales that stir around our valleys.

The body needs to be slow, doing work, but not with an ethic of work, instead with a stillness; not with a product in mind, just a scattered gesture toward something.

That is enough for one day. It is an achievement to stand in gumboots, make layers out of wilderness and throw seed optimistically.

MIHI

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou, katoa

Thank you for the introduction.

Thanks to college, for supporting us, for talking about burnout,

for their recent resource "Self care. Caring for ourselves and our colleagues"

for adding stress to this years workforce survey. Thank you for Emmanuel for sharing the results

And thank you Jeremy. I love that after 30 years service to GP you are still thinking, questioning, trying to see through the complexities of what we do.

We have all brought our stories into this room. I am going to tell you mine.

But all our stories are different. Really different. And I would love to hear your stories. I would also be keen to set up a peer group for an ongoing conversation. My email lucyohagan@gamil.com

Incidentally this photo is my last day on call in Wanaka. I think the patient survived but the doctor looking a little pasty.

Thanks to all my support people including my wonderful GP, my partner, my kids.

To my patients-their stories have taught me much about life, and myself.

START

Dr No Body

Over many years I lost my body.

I didn't know I had lost it

but I had ignored it for so long,

told it to shut up,

told it off for not being right,

made it to push on without rest,

made it to go without meals,

told it it had no rights or needs,

refused to listen to it,

that in the end I lost all contact with it,

and became a sort of body shell

with an oversized head.

And finally my thin cast of a body,

crumpled, folded, slowly and meekly

leaving my head

without organs to support it.

RELAXATION

To start I'd like to do a short exercise to locate ourselves in our bodies. Put down anything you are holding, including your phone and just rest your hands on your lap. Close your eyes. Feel your eyelids rest over your eyes. Feel your

feet inside your shoes, feel the floor pressing up on your heels, feel how your big toe rests next to your second toe.

Feel your hands resting on your lap, the stillness of them, your fingertips and how the fingers touch each other. Feel your belly, talk nicely to it. When you breathe in through your nose imagine your belly swelling. As you breathe out feel your shoulders relax. Breathe in and out very slowly filling your belly then letting your shoulders go. If you have thoughts notice them then come back into your body. As you breathe notice your body, notice any areas of discomfort or tension, be kind to those parts of your body, and as you breathe out breathe the tension out of them. Notice all the sensations in your body, listen to them, breathe to them.

Take once last breathe in and out and open your eyes. Just keep that sense of your body as you become aware of the room again.

This talk is a series of pieces of writing about my burnout. Between each piece we will pause and I will say the word 'breathe'. When I say breathe I want you go back to your body, breathe out and take one deep slow breath into your belly. It goes like this...

BREATHE

Most burnout talks are about *other* people. This talk is about me. It may also be about you. It is almost certainly about us.

I love being a GP. I love the uncertain weirdness of it. I actually love the heart sink patients no one else wants to see. I worked for 20 years in one of the best rural practices in the country. We had good systems, facilities, and income, great work life balance, wonderful staff. We were like a family.

But one of us burnt out, fell off the edge, had to stop. That was me. No one noticed until it was too late. I sure didn't notice. Or maybe someone did notice, but had no map for how to respond. I had no map.

I thought that I was protected from burnout. I thought I was pretty resilient, had good support, good self-awareness and I loved my job.

In our medical training, we absorbed some strange idea that

Burnout happens to other doctors, not us

Burntout doctors don't cope, which we do.

They need extra supports, that we don't need.

Burntout people probably don't have lunch breaks which we always do.

They probably don't exercise which we all do

Burntout people can't say no, which we are really good at.

They have certain personality weaknesses which we don't have.

According to research they are cynical, irritable, work harder, neglect their own needs, lose touch with their values, withdraw.

They have probably got other, issues which we don't have.

None of us wanted to be one of them.

BREATHE -that's your queue

As luck would have it

I never made a serious mistake when I was burning out but I

Never let the sun set on pus

Have you too got the professor of surgery in your head?

A whakapapa of medical deans who scrutinize you, remind you,

With their volume of cautionary tales, how you might get it wrong?

Never let the sun set on pus

You know what happens in the dark when pus is left to fester don't you?

You must work tirelessly, selflessly to find it. You can have no needs.

Never let the sun set on pus.

And never stop listening to the voices of your medical tipuna,

They will keep you safe.

But the cost of inviting them into your head

will be your own self.

And when you fall off the edge,

the peers in your head will desert you, judge you, patronize you,

But when finally, you see that you too are flesh, sinew, soul,

and not just mighty mind of doctor
that you have been looking for pus in patients,
only to find it in your own self.
When you know that, my moko, you are the future
Take care who you invite into your head
And never let the sun set, on your own pus

BREATHE

The I'm fine anthem

The I'm fine anthem has a chorus you can all join in with. It goes like this

Are you ok? We're fine. We're doctors.

Are you ok? We're fine. We're doctors.

I've got a baby at the creche and another due next month,
I had just 2 hours sleep and got pneumonia last week,
And the patients are demanding stuff today.

Are you ok? We're fine. We're doctors.

Oh yay my mornings fully booked and script requests are piling
I got phone calls and messages, and walkins in passages
And now I have to tell someone they're dying.

Are you ok?. We're fine. We're doctors.

I've got a bladder that's so full, and I never had my lunch,
I got hangry at the nurses, sucked lollipops and curses,
And the inbox flashes red, do me at once.

Are you ok? We're fine. We're doctors.

There's someone crying in my room, and a baby with the nurse,
I've got a waiting room that's full and a Colles still to pull,
And a plumber needing sutures, nothing worse.

Are you ok? We're fine. We're doctors.

Are you ok? We're fine. We're doctors.

BREATHE

Ode to Self Care

Self care seems to be a very individual and private occupation,
something one does secretly, alone,
so that the consequences of self care are obvious
in a happy relaxed disposition
but the process of getting there
is invisible.

To be honest one can get past the point
where one has energy for self care.

It feels like hard work to go to yoga,
to remember to be mindful,
to locate gratitude in the day from hell.

Self care can feel like another thing to achieve
and to fail at.

But apparently most of the stress we experience is self-generated, so we better get onto it.

And just to be provocative,

self care has a whiff of a neo-liberal world view that claims

we are all responsible for ourselves

If you are in poverty you are not working hard enough,

If you are unhappy you simply have to think differently,

If you are a loser, well sorry, the winners take all.

Do we still have any responsibility for each other?

Where is our collective care?

Is your workplace a healthy place to be?

Do you know the doctor in the next room?

Would you know if they were suffering?

Why do we still go to medical meetings about work stress and none of us leave the windowless building all day? Why do we think 12 hour days are ok?

Are we saying that self care is for other people, not real doctors like us?

BREATHE

What happened to me was ordinary life.

I wasn't easy. Burnout creates a complex internal web of exhaustion/failure, self judgment/denial, shame/defence.

Doctors who are burning out are tricky. I became more and more isolated, didn't go to morning tea, shut my door, because all I could deal with was the patients. I didn't want extra work or questions and I would come in after hours and struggle through the inbox. I was really lucky I didn't make a mistake.

I thought I was doing self care, I reduced my work from 6 to 4 tenths, I took lots of holidays and minibreaks, I walked, I was in a supportive relationship, I did less on call, I took much less of a role in practice management. I had this idea that everything would be ok once life settled down, there appeared to be an end point to what I was in. I just needed to hang on.

But over 2 years, my vitality slowly vaporized, I became more and more hunkered down, weighted, a posture of stoop, inert, a self shielding body position.

I was very hard to help, there were lots of layers to get through. But I know that if the right person had been brave enough and gentle enough and kind enough. If someone had been prepared to ask more than “Are you ok?” To sit with what they could see in front of them without judgment, I might have cracked earlier. But we don’t have experience of having those conversations with colleagues we work with-we can do it with patients but not with each other. I didn’t go to my GP. I didn’t have a supervisor or a mentor.

I was told I had become irritable but I didn’t need criticism I needed kindness. I honestly have little recollection of being irritable. It’s not the way I would want to be in the world. But to acknowledge what my irritability might be like for others, I would have to acknowledge my own distress and that was way too big.

What happened to me was ordinary life, life happens to doctors too.

Relationships deteriorate insidiously over many years. I’m not one who gives up easily so I persisted in trying to make them work. It’s a hard thing to separate from your partner of 28 years and the beautiful father of your kids. It’s the hardest thing ever to tell your kids, to know you are hurting them. It’s incredibly stressful to separate lives that have been shared for 3 decades, homes, bank accounts, insurances, retirement plans, recipe books, children’s paintings, family treasures. It is an emotional, paperwork and management nightmare which you are doing in a dynamic you are both trying to get out of.

These things happen to us. Doctors are humans too.

It was a relief when I moved next door. And soon after I fell in love which was one of life’s rich blessings. But to protect other people I had to keep it secret for 8 months and then my partner had to leave her marriage, break up her family, it was another 2 years of lawyers, accountants, wills, house purchases, relationship property agreements, dealing with family who shunned us, teenagers in grief. Loss of kin.

This is life, it happens to doctors too.

General practice is a huge job that requires us to be 100% well. When life happens to us, as it will, events that drain huge amounts of energy, we need to

stop and attend to ourselves. I didn't. Nothing in the culture of general practice told me that taking a break would be a wise and admirable thing to do. In medicine pushing on is admirable. Doctors who need stress leave are other doctors, not us. Doctors who need stress leave sort of quietly disappear with their tail between their legs. They are spoken of in hushed tones.

We too are whole persons. Homeostatic organisms, you can apply stress to the system and it will adapt to a new equilibrium, apply more stress and it will adapt again but there is a limit.....eventually the system cannot cope and that is what happened to me. I thought the 4 years of stressors were over, took a lovely long summer holiday with my family, came back to work and simply unravelled. It was the strangest sensation, part of me watching it going, wow this can't be happening to me.

My mind just simply went into shut down. I was like the main circuits in my brain had fizzled into silence and I had to work really hard to bring in collateral circuits so I could just get through a morning of general practice. But the collateral circuits were slow and unreliable and needed huge amount of energy to activate them. And the collaterals had no switch off so that at the end of the day my brain was just randomly firing and could not rest.

I knew I had to stop. I got to the point I could not do another day. I also decided to sell my practice so I was not under pressure to return. All of it was really hard on my colleagues and my staff.

And it was hard on me-now with no brain at all I had to say goodbye to my patients, navigate a practice sale, make an insurance claim, report to the medical council, deal with an incredible sense of failure. That was 2 years ago.

Most burnout talks are about other people because burntout people can't think to string a sentence together, because burnout comes packaged with shame, because it takes some piece of energy and bravery to stand in front of our colleagues and be honest.

BREATHE

I never answer calls from private numbers. I don't want surprising saboteurs in my day. Not now.

But I did pick it up. Remnant of good girl.

“Hello Dr OHagan its Joy Burns from the medical council. We have received your online application for medical registration. But you have not filled in your workplace”

“I don’t have a workplace at the moment”

“We can’t process your application without the address of your workplace.”

“I’m not working”

“Why do you need to be registered if you are not working”

‘I’d like to work soon”

“Well where will you be working then?”

“I don’t know yet. I’m sick”

“well we still need the address of your workplace”

“I ticked the box on section 9”

“well, section 9 goes straight to the health committee, I can’t see that”

I had ticked the box on section 9. I knew I would have to, but when it came I froze my finger over the Yes.

“In the last year have you had any illness or health problem that effected your capacity to work as a doctor?”

I pressed Yes and wept.

I knew what happened when you said yes.

I had seen it happen to other doctors.

Yes was like walking naked into a room of suited colleagues for interrogation.

Yes was like being placed in a half way house, awaiting assessment. Some go from there to the slaughterhouse, others allowed back in conditionally.

Yes was shame.

Yes, I do have a burnt out brain.

Yes, I know you might think that it is a suspect diagnosis that hasn’t even made it to DSMV. But shyness has.

Yes, I know that you might view me as some sort of flake who is probably just depressed or repressing her childhood.

But let me tell you how it is to have a brain that is pallid, without blood.

Let me tell you how it is to lose your greatest asset, your mind, to not be able to think or follow a recipe or read or listen to national radio. How dull it is to lie in a silent room.

Let me tell you what it is to be humbled.

I did tick yes. I was well over the brink, but a PDF popped up on what happens after you tick yes.

It was the most inhumane document, devoid of compassion, not a hint of care for the human being, the colleague who is ill. Not even 'thank you for being honest' or 'its really hard to tick that box but we are here to help you'. No it was about a semi legal, official process aimed at protecting the patients from me.

BREATHE

My response the professor of detachment in my head, who says doctors burn out because they get too involved with patients.

It was not the heat of their suffering that burnt me, it was the heat of my own.

Last week I went back into what was once my consulting room and lay on the floor in the dark. It had ended badly. I wanted to see it from a different angle and sitting in the chairs was too literal. I needed to feel the cool concrete slab under my back, let something mysterious and sore drain out through the beige carpet tiles, through the firmness, into the earth.

The wall they looked at from their chair was painted a warm autumn tone called Karma and on the Karma I had hung paintings of coloured people, drawings of fearful passages and photographs of angels. My seat faced the other way towards the sterile basin, hand sanitiser and eye chart. I had put a tiny painting of an unhygienic Grecian urn above the paper towel dispenser.

I have returned to remember them, the procession of souls who went in and out carrying their bundles of troubles. They make me smile. All good folk. Now I understand the fear and isolation of being them, for I live with that fear, that this might be it. I feel warmed by them, soothed. Their courage infuses me.

I have returned because I need this room to talk to me.

I have crept back in the dark to feel the angels, hear the procession souls whisper to me and let the rest seep out of me.

It was not the heat of their suffering that burnt me, it was the heat of my own.

BREATHE

When someone who has always been strong loses all their vitality and capacities, its hard on those around them.

What I needed was family, silence, no pressure, good food, walks, slowness.

I needed to know I was still ok, things would get better, there was a way through. I needed words for what was held in my body. I needed to hear my father tell me “there is an opportunity in every threat however bad it is, you will find it”.

I needed to laugh. I needed people who I could be honest with, people who were open, to anything. Sometimes I needed people who knew nothing of my troubles so I could rest from them, I needed touch.

BREATHE

I am learning to value contemplation, slowness, intentional under achievement.

It’s hard in a world where we are constantly measured, we are not rich enough, not thin enough, not happy enough, relaxed enough, have not achieved enough.

What happened to, have I been kind enough, good *enough*, neighbourly enough, generous enough, slow enough, still enough to be wise in my actions.

I am learning to love being ordinary. It is much less stressful to be just ordinary. There is no pressure. I can just be. Ordinary strips away all the grandiosity of medicine. Ordinary takes away the need to be special, important or make a difference in the world.

Burnout left me stripped away, naked, loss of structures of self. Lying on a bed with a big blank mind.

It didn't feel like an opportunity. But somewhere I knew it was. Not an opportunity to improve oneself or take a rest before rushing back into career development but just a blank nakedness awaiting a new covering.

An ordinary covering. Not flash. Just warm, welcoming, quiet.

BREATHE

My mind has started to wake up

I have been thinking

Firstly, I scoured my personhood trying to understand what essential deficits in me had caused this to happen.

I created a giant list of things I could improve on.

I worked very hard on those things.

Secondly, I created a list of all the things we could do differently in general practice so we all thrived. I refound my enthusiastic self so the list is long, and I'll read it too you really quickly, so don't try and take notes!

First of all its obvious that all GPs need a wife and if they want to work full time they need 2 wives.

Its simple stuff, some of you progressive folk probably doing this already.....but if you think you don't need any of this.....mmm breathe

I would spend much more time in my partners rooms,
worry less about money,
leave more management to managers,
just because

I would employ a robot to do the inbox
A health navigator for all those tasks that don't need me
A waiting room jester just to make us laugh.
Just because.

I would have 8 weeks holiday a year
give all my staff a healthy fund for conferences,
and sabbaticals every 5 years
Just because

I would have mentoring and supervision something normal, that everyone does at least 4 times a year,
declare mental health days to be a sign of mental health,
have a staffing system with flexibility so that when life happens to us, as it will,
we are free to look after ourselves without pressure on those left working,

I would take my practice nurse out to lunch just for fun,
Just because
take dawn walks with my receptionist,
Just because
give everyone a 30minute tea break and sometimes I would take a tea tray into the waiting room and sit there,
Just because

I would breathe and listen to my body and be honest.
And all these things would help.

And we could all create a cornerstone indicator of burnout prevention strategies and we could measure practices and GPs on their burnout potential and we could provide workbooks and supervision for those at risk. And these things would help.

But they wouldn't be enough.

BREATHE

They would not be enough because we need to start with compassion for ourselves.

I am a very kind compassionate GP, I am not attached to biomedicine so I am curious and open to anything and when I hold this stance something magic happens.....I'm really good at this

But when I gaze upon myself, especially my doctor self, it has been really hard to have compassion for me, to see my burnout with kind open curiosity. I realize that I have invited into my head a grandstand of medical masters who judge me and find me wanting.

Where is the appreciation in medicine? We sometimes get it from patients sometimes from our staff. How often to you hear doctors really acknowledge each other?

We need colleagues in our heads who appreciate us and guide us.

You all do fantastic work, every day. Yes you.

Appreciate yourself and you will be able to see the good, great, and marvellous in the doctor next to you.

And maybe we could add 'appreciation' to the list of characteristics of healthy practices in the extra for experts' section of Cornerstone. And that would help. But it's not enough.

It is not enough because in reducing our experience of stress to a series of tick boxes, I think we would miss the overarching driver of burnout, the mysterious barely visible mesh that intensifies the burn, and makes it so hard to get out.

And that thing is shame. Shame.

BREATHE

You see the burnout was bad, but the shame was crippling.

Shame is worse than failure, shame is an internal sense one has transgressed some shared standard, it has a moral dimension, shame globalizes a single failure to a failure of one's whole self, shame isolates the shamed from the group.

We all know the fear of being shamed as a doctor, we were trained in a culture of humiliation. We fear making mistakes, getting it wrong, not coping.

When our colleagues reveal a shame near miss event, something they didn't know or something that made them vulnerable, we feel the discomfort,

we want to rescue with them the answer, that makes us feel better,

or we want to collude with them in blaming someone else the hospital, the consultant, the patient.

Or we want to make them other, different from us,

It is an elaborate dance of collegial shame avoidance. We don't want to see them shamed. We don't want to feel their shame in us.

I was ashamed for a long time, I am not now.

After all what a strange standard I transgressed. A standard that says that to be a good doctor I need to be detached from my own body, not listen to it, have no needs, a sort of partial person, Dr No Body, a brain without organs. I don't want to be like that.

Extreme detachment has its uses in medicine especially in emergencies but as a general way of being it is kind of ridiculous.

Add to detachment the standard that says Lucy you must be invincible, pushing on through all sort of crises, and we have a very nasty cocktail, a person who works on and on not listening to their body, so not even realizing that things are going wrong

Add a culture of shaming and othering. And we can see why we have a burnout problem.

Without shame my burnout would be not such a big deal, a bit of a pain for my colleagues, a bit of rest and recovery, a bit boring. And if burnout had no shame with it I may never have got to that place because I would have seen it early, we would have had a collective collegial realization and map for what to do.

Shame probably has some functions in situations where we have committed mortal sins, but when there really is no crime, other than being human, when the shared morality is suspect, when the shame is overwhelming and isolating, it is time for us to rethink. When we have a huge gap between who we think we ought to be as doctors, and who we are, we need to

BREATHE

And know that we GPs can lead the way in medicine redefining the good doctor, the great colleague, the healthy workplace.

Whatever story you are in, you are great, just the way you are. In this moment.

I love the work you do. Let's take all those beautiful skills we have, all that compassion and pragmatism and curiosity and humour and kindness and give that to ourselves and each other.

Tell your stories. To yourself, to each other. Kia kaha

And I am going to finish by shamelessly singing you, I'm not a singer but this is my Celtic blessing for you all.

BREATHE

May the road rise up to meet you
May the wind always be at your back
May the sun shine gently on your face
May you tread lightly on your way

