

Occupational stressors and psychosocial resources among physician assistants: A mixed methods study

Numerous epidemiological studies documented adverse psychosocial working conditions and their relationship with poor health-related outcomes among health care staff. Comparable evidence remains limited however for physician assistants (PAs) who represent the largest professional group in German primary care. This study aimed to gain insights into a) their psychosocial working conditions, work stressors and resources, and b) into the potential relationship of working conditions with health-related outcomes.

This study is based on an exploratory sequential mixed methods design: In a first step, qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted to improve the understanding of the psychosocial working conditions as experienced by PAs. Based on these insights, we developed a questionnaire capturing work stress among PAs, which was tested and psychometrically evaluated in a survey.

First results: The qualitative studies suggest that PAs perceive their working conditions as characterized by high demands, low job control and low rewards. A high workload and unforeseeable incidents were reported as salient occupational stressors. Interpersonal relationship problems with superiors and a lack of social support from colleagues were additional stressors. At the same time though, support from superiors and colleagues seemed to represent a potential key resource for coping with work stressors. Adequate wages and appreciation from superiors and society emerged as areas for needed intervention. Further, the majority of interviewed PAs mentioned an impact of their working conditions on the quality of care, especially on the quality of social interactions with patients and the rate of minor mistakes. Our first results highlight the relevance of further research and preventive actions.

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