

Commonwealth Declaration for Empowerment of Junior Doctors

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PREAMBLE

We, the representatives of Junior Doctors from National Medical Associations (NMAs) across the Commonwealth, assembled in Chennai, India, during the 27th Biennial Conference of the Commonwealth Medical Association – on 9th November 2024, acknowledge the vital contributions of junior doctors in delivering healthcare and the unique challenges they encounter in their early careers.

This Commonwealth Declaration for Junior Doctors reaffirms our unified commitment to the well-being, growth, and resilience of junior doctors, recognizing their critical role as the backbone of healthcare systems. Grounded in the principles of equity, dignity, and empowerment, this Declaration aims to create supportive environments that safeguard the mental and emotional health of junior doctors, foster personal and professional development, and build their leadership capacity.

With this Declaration, we call upon Governments, Health Institutions, and Professional Bodies across the Commonwealth to prioritize initiatives that address workplace violence, foster healthy work

environments, and expand career and training opportunities within and beyond borders. We also advocate for strengthening mentorship, promoting research, supporting medical entrepreneurship, and building exchange programs to help junior doctors embrace family medicine, primary healthcare, and community-oriented practices. This collective commitment ensures a nurturing environment for junior doctors that will strengthen healthcare systems and enhance the well-being of communities across the Commonwealth.

RECOGNITION OF CHALLENGES

- Junior doctors frequently face workplace violence, which undermines their safety and well-being, affecting their capacity to provide effective patient care. A recent study in India shows that 80.4% of healthcare professionals experience verbal abuse and 21.7% experience physical violence(1).
- A recent study from the United Kingdom shows that Junior doctors reported poor mental health, with many severely depressed (45.2%), anxious (63.2%) and stressed (40.2%)(2). Junior doctors face unique mental health stressors, with depression, anxiety, and suicide rates

higher than in the general population, necessitating proactive support systems.

- A recent letter by the Maharashtra State Association of Resident Doctors to the Governor of Maharashtra highlights that 11 Postgraduate residents have committed suicide in the last 5 years and the residents are forced to work for up to 120 hours a week(3). The letter has also added about how the culture of mental abuse of junior doctors is glorified and how residents are threatened to be failed in examinations by seniors. Toxic work environments and unrealistic expectations contribute significantly to burnout among junior doctors, leading to high dropout rate rates and mental health issues.
- The limited awareness of available job opportunities, both domestically and internationally, creates uncertainty for junior doctors, affecting their motivation and overall career satisfaction.
- Limited support for medical entrepreneurship restricts junior doctors' potential to innovate and contribute to healthcare solutions. Entrepreneurial skills are critical for young doctors to pioneer new practices and technologies in healthcare.
- Despite their eagerness, junior doctors often lack access to research opportunities and mentorship(4), hampering their contributions to medical advancements and evidence-based practice.
- Limited opportunities for exchange programs and global exposure hinder the professional development of junior doctors, affecting their ability to learn from diverse healthcare systems and practices. Therefore, promoting international exchange programs becomes crucial(5).
- Many junior doctors lack orientation towards primary healthcare and family medicine due to training gaps, although these fields are essential for strengthening healthcare systems(6).
- Junior doctors are often underprepared for leadership roles due to inadequate training in leadership, despite their potential to become future leaders in healthcare policy and clinical practice(7).
- The demanding nature of medical training makes it challenging for junior doctors to maintain a healthy work-life balance, increasing the risk of burnout and reducing overall job satisfaction(8).

COMMITMENTS

1. We commit to advocating for policies and legal protections that prioritize the safety and well-being of junior doctors, including measures to prevent workplace violence, with mechanisms for reporting abuse and protecting whistleblowers.
2. We pledge to work towards establishing comprehensive mental health support systems for junior doctors, including access to counseling services, peer support networks, and mental health resources aimed at reducing rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide.
3. We commit to advocating for respectful, inclusive, and non-toxic work environments by promoting zero-tolerance policies for harassment, mental abuse, and other forms of workplace toxicity. We also advocate for fair workloads and realistic expectations to support junior doctors' well-being.
4. We pledge to support and promote policies that limit the working hours of junior doctors to ensure a balance that safeguards their health and well-being, with a particular focus on preventing burnout and fatigue.
5. We are committed to raising awareness about career opportunities for junior doctors within and outside their home countries through initiatives like job fairs, career counseling, and information networks to enhance their career satisfaction and stability.
6. We commit to fostering an environment that encourages medical entrepreneurship among junior doctors by offering training and mentorship opportunities, along with resources to help them develop innovative healthcare solutions.
7. We pledge to promote increased access to research opportunities for junior doctors, supporting their involvement in academic research, evidence-based practice, and clinical innovation, through partnerships with research institutions and mentoring programs.
8. We commit to promoting international exchange programs that provide junior doctors with global exposure, allowing them to learn from diverse healthcare systems, share best practices, and broaden their professional networks.
9. We pledge to emphasize the importance of primary healthcare and family medicine in junior doctor training programs, highlighting these fields as fundamental for building resilient healthcare systems and improving community health.

10. We are committed to incorporating leadership training into junior doctors' education, ensuring they are equipped to lead healthcare teams, advocate for policy change, and contribute to public health initiatives.
 11. We pledge to promote junior doctors' involvement in healthcare policy discussions, advocating for their inclusion in decision-making processes to bring fresh perspectives to pressing healthcare issues.
 12. We commit to promoting innovative and flexible working conditions that accommodate junior doctors' personal and professional needs, ensuring a productive and supportive environment that values their contributions and well-being.
7. Within 9 months, NMAs should collaborate to establish or expand exchange programs, allowing junior doctors to gain international exposure, share best practices, and enhance their professional competencies.
 8. Within 9 months, NMAs should ensure that leadership training is incorporated into junior doctors' curriculum, preparing them for roles in healthcare management, policy, and public health.
 9. Allocate at least one session for Junior Doctors' wellness-related topics in the upcoming National Annual Conference of each National Medical Association and continue this annually.
 10. Encourage the National Medical Associations to promote the publication of at least one Junior Doctors' wellness-related article per issue in the respective National Medical Journals.
 11. Leaders of Junior Doctors' Network across Commonwealth countries to convene biannually - to review the progress and strategize future actions.

CALL TO ACTION

1. Each National Medical Association(NMA) to form a Standing Committee for Junior Doctors within one month, ensuring adequate gender representation.
2. Within 90 days, each NMA should establish a task force to address junior doctors' safety concerns and prepare formal representations to their respective governments. These representations should advocate for policy changes on critical issues such as workplace violence prevention, humane working hours, mental health support, and the mitigation of toxic work environments, fostering continuous liaison with government bodies to ensure lasting improvements.
3. Within 3 months, NMAs should organize national and regional career counseling sessions to promote awareness of domestic and international job opportunities, increasing junior doctors' career stability.
4. NMAs are called upon to introduce orientation programs within 3 months, guiding junior doctors toward careers in primary healthcare and family medicine to strengthen community health services.
5. Within 6 months, each NMA should create a committee to support medical entrepreneurship, providing junior doctors with resources, workshops, and mentorship for innovative healthcare solutions.
6. NMAs should establish mentorship programs within 6 months, connecting junior doctors with experienced healthcare professionals to foster career development and research participation. NMAs should allocate or advocate for dedicated research funds that allow junior doctors to participate in and lead medical research.

CONCLUSION

In affirming this Commonwealth Declaration for Empowerment of Junior Doctors, we, the National Medical Associations and representatives of Junior Doctors across the Commonwealth, commit to advancing the well-being, safety, and empowerment of junior doctors, recognizing their vital role in healthcare and the unique challenges they face. This Declaration pledges to create supportive environments that prioritize mental health, safeguard against workplace violence, and expand career growth and leadership opportunities. By uniting governments, healthcare institutions, and professional bodies in this mission, we will advocate for fair work conditions, promote mentorship, encourage medical entrepreneurship, and strengthen pathways in primary healthcare. Through this collective effort, we aim to transform challenges into opportunities, ensuring junior doctors can thrive, innovate, and lead in providing quality healthcare, thereby enhancing healthcare systems and community well-being across the Commonwealth.

RECOMMENDATION

Ensuring the well-being and professional development of junior doctors is crucial for sustaining resilient healthcare systems across the Commonwealth. Addressing workplace violence, mental health challenges, and career uncertainties will not only enhance the safety and productivity of

junior doctors but also improve patient care outcomes. By fostering mentorship, research, and leadership training, this declaration aims to create a supportive ecosystem where junior doctors can thrive, ultimately strengthening primary healthcare and advancing global health equity.

RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

This declaration highlights the pressing challenges faced by junior doctors across Commonwealth nations and proposes a structured framework for their well-being, professional development, and career advancement. By addressing critical issues, this declaration adds to the existing knowledge by offering a collective policy response from National Medical Associations. It underscores the necessity of systemic reforms, mentorship programs, and international collaborations to create a supportive environment for junior doctors. The Commonwealth Declaration for Empowerment of Junior Doctors serves as a roadmap for policymakers, healthcare institutions, and professional organizations to implement sustainable changes that will enhance the resilience, safety, and career satisfaction of junior doctors, ultimately strengthening healthcare systems across the Commonwealth.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

All authors have contributed equally.

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Nil

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

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DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT for language assistance in drafting the Commonwealth Declaration. The declaration was developed through the consensus of Commonwealth Medical Association leaders, and ChatGPT was utilized to refine the language, enhance clarity, and ensure coherence in the document. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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