

## **Be a better doctor: Support your residents**

Written by Dr. Tom McLaughlin on December 22, 2015 for [The Medical Post](#)

The president of Resident Doctors of Canada offers thoughts from the new generation

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*Increasingly asked to do more with less, Canadian doctors understand the importance of delivering stellar care to their patients, and seem to always be on the lookout for ways to work harder, better and more efficiently. Here are some tips, tricks and hacks designed to help you be a better MD in 2016.*

For practising physicians wondering how they can make improvements in 2016, I have one resolution to suggest: Do your best to support resident doctors. After all, being a medical resident is tough-in addition to having to learn an entire medical or surgical specialty, there's the 100-hour work weeks and the crushing six figure debt (not to mention the questionable hospital food choices). The last thing a resident needs on top of all this is an unnecessarily tough attending staff physician.

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Resident doctors, like myself, are on the frontlines of health-care delivery in Canada, especially in academic hospitals. We listen to patients when they're scared or confused, advocate for them within the health-care system and help them make important decisions about their health and treatments. On top of all this, we're still studying hard to be specialists, and trying to carve out time for friends and family. But what am I saying: every doctor practising now has been there, right?

Well, the problem is, I hear a common saying from many staff physicians: "It was so much harder when I did my residency." This makes me wonder if attending staff appreciate that a 21st century resident has unique challenges. Nowadays, medical knowledge expands so quickly that the medical dogma from the start of residency might not even be correct at the end of it. Our medical system is increasingly complex, bureaucratic and technology driven, and attending staff are sometimes shielded from this. For example, most staff have probably never dealt with a cranky electronic chart, which might inexplicably decide, at 4 a.m., to delete all the orders on a sick patient, necessitating re-entering the orders by hand. They've probably never had to sit through the ninth session in a year of mandatory hospital handwashing training.

And it's not just the challenges of modern medicine that make our residencies unique-sometimes, the attending staff themselves are even part of the challenge. It can range from benign neglect to overbearing micromanagement, and everything in between. I had one friend, for example, who was repeatedly asked to stay late after work to show her attending physician how to Snapchat with his daughter (for those not in the know, Snapchat is a picture and video messenger service for smart phones. Google it-don't make a resident explain it to you). Another friend tells the story of having to sleep on the floor overnight because his staff, looking to avoid noisy renovations, decided to take the resident call room.

The residents and medical students reading this can almost certainly relate to these stories, and probably have some of their own. In the 2013 National Resident Survey by Resident Doctors of Canada (the national association representing over 9,000 resident doctors in this country), more than 50% of respondents reported witnessing senior staff doctors unwilling to support or teach residents. Even worse, approximately 73% said they had experienced inappropriate behaviour that made them feel diminished. This can have serious effects on residents, who, as a whole, are already going to be a pretty stressed group. A recent study in the Journal of the American Medical Association (Dec. 8, 2015), for example, showed that the rate of

depression among U.S. resident doctors was 29%-almost three times the general population's level.

Don't get me wrong-residency is an amazing period in any young doctor's life, where we're able to grow from primordial medical students into full-fledged doctors. We'll deliver babies, perform surgeries, help patients and probably make a few mistakes along the way. A resident's attending staff physician is hugely influential in effecting these learning and working experiences. Residency may be different in 2016 than it was in 1976, but what remains the same is that our bosses largely shape our experience.

Pledge to make 2016 the year you really support your residents. Buy them a coffee, teach them a new subject or technique and be an excellent role model. By doing that, you're helping to make the next generation of Canadian physicians great.

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