

Study explores 'imposter syndrome' in physicians

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Even the most seasoned and successful physicians experience 'imposter syndrome' – that nagging feeling of self-doubt in so many of us – during times of personal struggle or when confronted by an error, according to a

new study from the Centre for Education Research & Innovation (CERI) at the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry.

The study was recently published in the journal *Academic Medicine*, and was co-authored by Drs. Kori LaDonna of the University of Ottawa, Chris Watling of Schulich and Shiphra Ginsburg of the Wilson Centre at the University of Toronto.

"We set out to study how physicians in practice navigate moments of failure or struggle," said Watling, a CERI scientist and the Associate Dean of Postgraduate Medical Education at Schulich. "We wanted to see if there were approaches that would be useful to struggling learners in the context of medical education."

Rather than studying those who were consistently underperforming, the group studied very successful people to see what they do to navigate and overcome those struggles.

Twenty-eight practicing physicians were interviewed about their experiences and the researchers said early in the data collection process, participants spontaneously identified 'imposter syndrome' as a feature of their experiences. The study results identified many of the study participants – even those at advanced career stages – questioned the validity of their achievements.

"There was this strong and unexpected thread of imposter syndrome identified during those interviews," Watling said. "We thought it was important to explore. Qualitative research requires us as researchers to follow compelling leads we identify in the data, so we started specifically asking questions that would elaborate on that idea."

The article is creating buzz with the medical community online, gaining traction and sparking conversation on [social media platforms](#) like

Twitter. This is encouraging to the team they may have hit the nail on the head.

"Resonance is one way of assessing the rigor of qualitative research," explained LaDonna, who just completed her postdoctoral fellowship at CERI and is the lead author on the study. "Our team is thrilled with the uptake on social media, particularly that our work seems to have provided an opportunity for people to safely talk about both their failures and feelings of imposter syndrome."

One of the reasons they suspect the medical community is so interested in this data is because the concept of underperformance is not talked about a lot in medicine.

"It's a very confidence-oriented profession," Watling said. "There aren't a lot of venues for physicians to share self-doubt and the sense maybe they aren't up to the task they've been given."

The hope now is to explore how these imposter syndrome feelings might influence a mentor's ability to help learners through their own struggles.

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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