

Time management: a guide for the foundation year doctor

Introduction

Many junior doctors feel that there are never enough hours in the day to do all their jobs. They end up feeling obliged to stay late to finish off routine tasks, reluctant to hand them over to the doctor on the late shift.

'Time is money' is an expression which has been used for centuries. In the authors' view, the reason people compare time with money is probably to stress the importance of how precious time is. You have to value it just as you value money. We need to understand how to make the best use of our time, use every moment and not waste it. We need to learn to manage time, just as we manage our money.

Before credit cards were widely used, people were generally very careful of the way they spent their money as they could see it going out of their hand every time they spent it. This probably made them more careful and vigilant about using it. Nowadays it can be a shock at the end of the month when people receive their credit card statements, but a person who thinks about their finances carefully may not feel that shock.

Time spent

If we add up how much time we spend chatting on the phone, sleeping, watching television or doing many other things without realizing, it will emphasize how much time we have lost that is never going to come back. So, effective use of time is very important, just as managing your finances is. A good time manager usually succeeds in every aspect of life and

can deal with any challenges in life very effectively.

It is amazing how long tasks actually take, and data collection can show this. When you are monitoring your hours for medical staffing, exploit it for yourself as a useful exercise and keep copies. Have you ever had days where you feel as if you have done nothing useful all day, and you are not even sure what you have done or achieved? A diary form will help show you that you did achieve something, but also identify anything you did not need to do.

Analyse how much time you spend walking. Do you criss-cross all over the place? Do you really have to take a chest X-ray card to radiology? In some hospitals, the ward clerk will take it if you ask nicely and want to beat the internal post. Are your wards and departments geographically spaced out or close together? If you feel you do not have time to visit a gym, then make a point of keeping fit on duty – walk more quickly and use the stairs.

Try to kill two or more birds with one stone. If you have got to go somewhere, think what else you can do on the way or when you get there, or what is near there. Write a 'to do' list in your ward round book, diary or clipboard, and take satisfaction from crossing things off.

You can suddenly find you have got nothing to do, depending on your specialty and the pattern of activity. You may go to the mess and read the paper. However, this could be a good time to try to do some planning, particularly if you can predict that it is likely to become much busier later. Also, is there anything else that you have been telling yourself you must get round to doing, such as writing an article or updating your portfolio? Maybe now is an opportunity to do it. One author managed to do all her revision for a postgraduate diploma in between patients.

There is actually great virtue in doing nothing when appropriate, because it can help re-charge your batteries. For instance, on a train journey, you may feel lazy for staring out of the window, but this can be good for you. So, it is not always about

filling every minute of the day usefully, but about making optimum use of time in a way that fulfils your needs. Equally, 'mindless' chatting on the phone can be therapeutic to a certain extent.

Planning

Time management tips are generally aimed at office workers and written by people who have got no idea of a clinical environment. Such guides are intended for workers who can plan ahead for a week or more at a time. For a junior doctor, this is not so simple, as it is difficult to predict what will be needed with patient care.

You need to have a systematic, logical and rational approach to managing your time so that you achieve the most you can and make the best of the time you have spent. This will not only help you prevent over-working but also help you work efficiently and effectively. Set a goal or target and plan how you would work towards it.

Think of one routine day which might have various activities or tasks that need to be performed, e.g. getting up in the morning, getting ready for work and activities in the workplace. Aside from that, there are on-call commitments, preparing for examinations or presentations and/or going for music lessons or other leisure activities. To justify the needs of all activities, you have to plan work and then work towards the plan.

Begin your busy day by planning it the night before. Make some time and think about the commitments you have and the plans you have to fulfil them. For instance, if you have to attend a ward round before going to clinic, plan what patient investigation reports you need to retrieve which will be needed for the ward round. Then, on the morning itself, you can have them ready before your consultant or senior colleague arrives. Keep a note of any new instructions you have gathered that you might need to manage yourself or might have to pass on to the appropriate person to help or continue further care.

If you are preparing to study for examinations or a presentation, plan to finish

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the topics that you feel are difficult, so that subconsciously you are free from stress. Choose the optimum time to study when you are able to perform at your best. Some people prefer to stay awake late at night, whereas others find getting up early to study more productive.

Keep a target time or date of when you want to finish a particular task and reward yourself at the end of it, even simply by having a bar of chocolate. You not only feel satisfied by your achievement but it will help you perform better.

Learn to work in adverse conditions, such as having to cover for colleagues who are off sick. You may have to cover accident and emergency, for example, when you are meant to be in clinic.

It is important to prioritize your work. When you are on call, give precedence to more urgent tasks and deal with them first. Delegation is also an important aspect of time management. Try to delegate work to an appropriate person so that you can perform at the best of your competence.

Do not forget to always plan time for your hobbies, as this will relax you and help you work more efficiently and effectively.

Breaks

Management and senior doctors often insist that juniors should be able to have statutory breaks and go home on time. If not, they may need a consultant's signature for monitoring. They can be accused of being inefficient at the beginning of a job, or of deliberately forgoing breaks in an attempt to obtain a band 3 salary payment.

Have you ever noticed how protective nurses are of their breaks? They make efforts to stagger them and cover each other, and they soon make it clear to you when they are 'on a break' and not to be disturbed. The reason is that they are not paid for them. Even though doctors are paid for their breaks, they are still entitled to an uninterrupted half-hour break roughly every 4 hours during the normal working day or full shift (NHS Management Executive, 1998). Perhaps doctors ought to start adopting nurses' tactics. Try to get a colleague to hold your bleep if possible. If not, then tell the nurse coordinator you are going on your break, and ask not to be allocated anything for half an hour.

It is false time economy to try to keep going when you are hungry or tired. There

are very few activities that cannot wait for half an hour. Once you have had your break, you will be more rested and efficient, both mentally and physically. If you just carry on, you can be slow and risk performing badly and affecting patient care. It is no good trying to insert a cannula when your hand is shaking with hypoglycaemia. It is not good for you, the patient or nursing staff who have to comfort patients after you have gone for your much-needed meal. Some doctors feel compelled to battle on because the unit is busy. However, a steady, never-ending busy-ness is different from urgent occurrences.

Some argue that the sooner they get all their jobs done, the sooner they can finish. In the old days of resident on-call rotas, it was understandable to aim for bed at a reasonable time in order to be able to work the next day. In this day and age of shifts, there is no sense in just working through. You will probably be so slow that you will not finish any earlier anyway.

Communication

Communication is very important for time management for all professionals. Many trusts have a bleep policy, so that you are not disturbed needlessly for every individual task unless urgent. It takes time for you to check the number on the bleep, explain to your patient that you have been called away, find a free phone, get through to the number required and then get to speak to the person who bleeped you. It is easier for nurses' time management to write things down or do tasks themselves rather than bleep for each task, get the notes and charts out, wait for the doctor to answer and explain the task and any other background information on the patient. If there is a delay in the bleep system, it compounds the problem. On the BBC East Midlands Today news on 16 February 2007, it was reported that it takes an average of 6.5 minutes to contact someone by bleep, in which time it is possible that a nurse could have done quite a lot of the task already.

Nurses do get twitchy if you are not around, even if they know you are on duty. They may not realize that you have got other wards and clinical areas to cover as well. Tell them roughly when you will be coming.

In one trust, one of the authors needed get a diabetic review of a patient. She

bleeped the diabetic senior house officer, to be told that it should be a ward nurse to nurse specialist referral. The author told the ward nurses this. However, the next day, they asked her again if she had contacted the diabetic team. She had obviously not adequately communicated this relatively new idea to them. A little more time spent at the beginning would have saved her time and the nurses' and ensured more timely care for the patient.

In another trust, one author was asked to contact the pathology department pre-operatively to ask for a frozen section. As a new house officer, she did not know the difference between a frozen section and routine histology, hence she did not understand why she should ring in advance. The operation was prolonged because this had to be sorted out at the last minute intra-operatively. Better checking of understanding from both sides would have prevented this and reduced the risk to the patient.

Conclusions

Time is a prized commodity that can easily get stolen. Guard your time preciousely and try not to waste it. Be judicious in planning your work days and leisure time. Appropriate time management can make you more efficient. Taking a tactical breather can pay dividends. Talk to doctors further on in their careers and find out how they can work efficiently. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: Dr Hooke has worked in both management and medicine.

NHS Management Executive (1998) *Reducing junior doctors' hours*. HSC 1998/240. NHS Executive, Leeds (www.dh.gov.uk/en/PublicationsAndStatistics/LettersAndCirculars/HealthServiceCirculars/DH_4003928 accessed 2 August 2007)

KEY POINTS

- Time is money – do not waste it.
- Analyse where your time goes – you may be surprised.
- Try to walk in straight lines and do tasks sequentially on the way.
- Planning and keeping a 'to do' list can be useful.
- Never skip meals or let yourself get 'past it' – it is false time economy.
- Be assertive about taking breaks.
- Communicate effectively with other staff.