Residents to the rescue

Is moonlighting a good thing or a bad thing?

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This month in Canadian Family Physician we present a debate on family medicine residents moonlighting during their residencies. Moonlighting is defined as any professional activity conducted or arranged by residents (or fellows) outside the purview of residency, and for which they receive additional compensation. Moonlighting is currently allowed in 8 of Canada’s 10 provinces. Drs Verma and Meterissian present, respectively, the arguments for and against this practice (page 1366-7). It is interesting to note that both of these authors are vice deans of large Canadian faculties of medicine. Which goes to show how far we are from consensus on this subject. Rarely have we published a debate like this where one point of view seems just as convincing as the other. Personally, it seems to me that they both have merit!

Advantages and disadvantages of moonlighting

Moonlighting certainly has several advantages. It allows residents to discover new practice settings, to develop their autonomy, to earn some extra money to make it to the end of the month, and all the while to see to medical needs in underserviced or overburdened areas.

On the other hand, those who oppose moonlighting are quick to point out the paradoxes associated with this practice.

• If residents can practise well enough after 18 months, why does residency last for 24 months? And to think that some even suggest it should last for 36 months!
• If residents are sufficiently competent to moonlight, why should they have to pass the College of Family Physicians of Canada’s Certification examinations, especially as successfully passing the Medical Council of Canada’s examinations is all that is usually required for moonlighting?

In fact, outside of administrative and corporate considerations, the real questions that residents should be asking themselves are: Why am I moonlighting? and, Am I really competent to do it?

Reasons for moonlighting

To get to know about practice in a remote region? Yes, but rotations in remote regions that are already obligatory, or at least an option, in most family medicine programs provide residents with this exposure under adequate supervision.

For altruism? Perhaps so, but there are many unfortunate countries in the world where sanitary conditions are appalling. Why spend your time in underserviced regions of our provinces or territories? If altruism is truly the objective, wouldn’t it be preferable to go to countries where conditions are dreadful and medical needs desperate?

For money? It’s true that remuneration can be a strong motivator. When you have the opportunity to earn in a weekend in an emergency department what you usually earn in a month in residency, or in a week of hospital duty what you normally earn in a semester, many would be tempted. Above all is the fact that residents finish their studies very much in debt. Some suggest that graduating residents are on average in debt to the tune of $100 000. But on the other hand, is it really worth the cost, especially as moonlighting residents have only 6 months of residency remaining, and the Certification examinations come soon after that.

In this debate, we should not forget, not ever, the potentially adverse and counterproductive effects of a hasty decision to moonlight. I know more than one young, idealistic, adventurous physician who has broken his teeth on some miserable experience, such as finding himself alone at the ends of the earth treating a patient with multiple trauma, repairing a fourth-degree tear of the perineum, or trying to revive a newborn whose APGAR is not progressing. These young doctors return from such experiences burnt-out, depressed, and disillusioned, not to mention the effects on their budding careers, saying that working in remote regions is not for them. While in reality they would have been excellent physicians in those places had they been better prepared and more knowledgeable.

In a nutshell, leaving aside administrative and social considerations, the decision to moonlight needs to be well thought out beforehand.

Competing interests
None declared