

Anne Money (NHS Education for Scotland), Jun-Hao Tan (NHS Education for Scotland), Kirsty Alexander (University of Dundee)

Background

There is a workforce crisis within primary care, and burnout may be a key reason why GPs are leaving the profession. Something needs to be done to help reduce GP burnout. Balint groups are one potential option.

The literature on the effects of Balint groups is not sufficiently robust, particularly in relation to burnout. Some have also questioned whether the benefits of Balint group participation are provided by other small group teaching for GP trainees.

Balint groups involve a facilitated small group discussion of challenging cases, focusing on the doctor-patient relationship.

Aims

- What are the experiences of GPs who were part of a Balint group during their GP training?
- Does this experience provide differing benefits from other small group teaching during GP training?
- Does this experience influence GP workforce retention?

Methods

Our approach is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The underpinnings of IPA are:

- **Phenomenology:** understanding the experience of a particular phenomenon. For our study, the phenomenon is the experience of being part of a Balint group as a GP trainee in Scotland
- **Hermeneutics:** dealing with interpretation
- **Idiography:** focused on the individual and their experiences

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Dundee School of Medicine and Life Sciences Research Ethics Committee (UOD-SMED-SLS-Staff-2024-24-05). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three participants who had been part of a Balint group during their GP training in Scotland. Each transcript was analysed individually, developing themes and super-ordinate themes, before comparing across cases.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured
interviews with three
participants

Themes and super-
ordinate themes
developed



Transcripts analysed



“It can be really easy to fall into a pattern where you feel like you’re not good enough or you’re struggling and everyone else is doing fine. And I think Balint was a really nice way of hearing that actually everybody had the same experiences.” - Olivia

“A lot of support and reassurance for what I did was probably what I remember the most... I think the beauty of the Balint group is having that peer support and that peer network as well, not just for the cases that you’re discussing there, but just generally for extra professional support.” - Rachel

Results

Super-ordinate themes and themes

Psychological Benefits

Reducing
Burnout

Catharsis

Deep
Reflection

Enjoyment

Social Benefits

Peer
Support

Differing
Perspectives

Shared
Experiences

Considerations

Unique
Attributes

Limited
Prior
Awareness

Competing
Interests

A Sense of
Discomfort

Reducing Burnout:

- There were repeated references to resilience and reducing burnout during the interviews, suggesting that participants consider it a central benefit of their Balint group experience.
- “Made me feel kind of bolstered and supported and more resilient to potential burnout.”
- “It helped me enjoy work... reminded me of that perspective that I think is important to hold on to, that these difficult, challenging cases are part of what makes it a brilliant, fascinating job.”

Unique Attributes:

- Each of our participants used terminology that spoke about Balint providing something unique for them, such as “rarely”, “the only one” and “you don’t get that with any other”.
- Participants felt that Balint group participation provided something different to the other small group teaching sessions they had as GP trainees. “In-depth conversations... a safe space to discuss the challenges... suggestions for how to improve. I mean, you don’t really get that with any of the other teaching.”

Limited Prior Awareness:

- Despite having gone through medical school and a period of postgraduate training, each participant had no previous Balint group experience before the group that they joined and little knowledge about what Balint groups were.
- “But was never anything that I heard anything about after that. Like I wasn’t aware of people doing it as a student or junior doctor or GP trainee.”

Conclusions

- Balint group participation as a GP trainee provides a predominantly positive experience, particularly with regards to reducing burnout. This in turn could have a positive influence on GP workforce retention.
- Balint groups add something unique compared to other teaching provided during GP training. Further research is needed to determine in more detail what these unique aspects are.
- The limited prior awareness of Balint groups among GP trainees means many GP trainees who might benefit from Balint group participation aren’t able to seek out the experience. Taster sessions may help with this.
- Training programmes should consider offering Balint groups as part of GP training.

“There’s a sense of feeling like you’ve got something off your chest... I always felt much like lighter after... and like a weight had been lifted really.” - Tom

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