International Journal of Community Medicine and Public Health
Basu D et al. Int J Community Med Public Health. 2025 Sep;12(9):4181-4185
http://www.ijcmph.com
pISSN 2394-6032 | eISSN 2394-6040

DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.18203/2394-6040.ijcmph20252871

Review Article

The silent burnout and the burgeoning health crisis among medical sales representatives in India

Debasis Basu[1]*, Soutri Ghosh[1], Surajeet Kumar Patra[2], Soubhik Sinhababu[3], Mukti Sadhan Nath[4], Nitin Gandhi[5], Nidhi Singh[6]

[1]METTA Care Clinic, Kolkata, India
[2]Department of Diabetology, Dr Surajeet Patra's Diabetes Clinic, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India
[3]Department of Diabetology, Simlapal, Bankura, West Bengal, India
[4]Azkka Pharmaceuticals, Kolkata, India
[5]Nucgnex Foundation, India
[6]Oncoheal, Pune, India

Received: 15 May 2025
Revised: 23 July 2025
Accepted: 24 July 2025

***Correspondence:**
Dr. Debasis Basu,
E-mail: drdbasu@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Occupational burnout among medical representatives (MRs) has emerged as a pressing yet insufficiently recognized public health concern, especially in the wake of an escalating epidemic of lifestyle-related health conditions. MRs are consistently exposed to a unique and complex blend of occupational pressures, which include ambitious performance expectations, toxic leadership behaviors, physical fatigue, digital saturation, and the transference of personal life stress into the workplace. Despite being the vital link between the pharmaceutical industry and medical practitioners, these individuals often experience emotional exhaustion, a sense of detachment, and a decline in personal efficacy. The World Health Organization (WHO) has rightly categorized burnout as an occupational phenomenon with adverse effects not only on human health but also on organizational productivity and the broader healthcare ecosystem. This paper takes a deep dive into the diverse and multifactorial origins of MR burnout and proposes a comprehensive and evidence-informed framework for intervention. Suggested strategies encompass a range of organizational changes such as flexible working conditions, structured wellness initiatives, ergonomic support mechanisms, financial literacy programs, and leadership development. Special importance is attributed to preventive health education, proper nutrition, awareness around mental well-being, and personalized health management models that go far beyond the conventional "master health check-up" routines.

Keywords: Medical representatives, Burnout, Occupational stress, Workplace wellness, Lifestyle disease

INTRODUCTION

In today's hyper-connected and fast-paced world, we find ourselves entrenched in what many call a "lifestyle disease epidemic".[1] It's in such a context that we are reminded of the timeless wisdom from Jim Rohn, an American entrepreneur and motivational speaker: "Take care of your body. It's the only place you have to live." This quote reinforces the core idea that the human body is our most valuable possession, one that must be nurtured with intentional care and diligence.

Wellness, therefore, is not a luxury-it is a necessity that demands regular attention. Burnout among medical representatives must be acknowledged and tackled with the seriousness it deserves, as it directly affects both the individual's quality of life and the overall performance of the organizations they work for.

WHAT IS BURNOUT

The term "burnout" was first introduced in the 1970s by Herbert Freudenberger and later classified by the WHO in 2019 under the ICD-11 as an "occupational phenomenon"-clarifying that it is not a medical disorder per se.[2-4] Burnout is best understood as a psychological condition that stems from chronic workplace-related stress, manifesting as emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and a diminished sense of personal achievement (PA).[5,6] It typically emerges when an organizational environment fails to accommodate the personal identity and emotional needs of its employees, resulting in continuous inner conflict and mental strain.[7]

DISCUSSION

Several studies and real-life experiences have highlighted a range of contributing factors that play a role in MR burnout, which are outlined below.

High job demands

MRs face intense pressure on multiple fronts-tight sales targets, repetitive follow-ups with physicians, responsibilities towards distributors, and long-distance travel. This sustained pressure often leads to chronic fatigue and eventual emotional depletion.

Toxic leadership and abusive supervision

Many MRs find themselves under the thumb of unsupportive or even hostile management. Unreasonable expectations, lack of empathy, and micromanagement amplify workplace stress. As highlighted in a study from the Indian journal of occupational and environmental medicine, abusive supervision can significantly mediate the link between high job demands and the onset of burnout.[8]

Job demands, in this context, refer to the emotional, cognitive, social, and physical aspects of one's professional life that demand constant effort and engagement.[9]

Physical and musculoskeletal strain

The nature of an MR's job is highly physical-endless hours on the move, climbing multiple staircases in hospitals, and carrying heavy promotional bags. These tasks, often underestimated, can lead to persistent musculoskeletal issues if not addressed in time. At times, MRs are turned away by doctors-an interaction that's still logged as a "sales call"-while some practitioners may set unrealistic conditions for granting prescriptions. Adding to this, they are expected to accommodate the diverse preferences of both doctors and distributors, often at the cost of their own comfort. All these factors magnify workplace dissatisfaction and burnout.

Personal stress spillover

Studies show that stress stemming from personal health problems, familial discord, and financial challenges often spills over into the work domain. This crossover effect creates a vicious cycle were personal dissatisfaction feeds workplace disengagement and vice versa. Financial pressures, especially when they hinder the ability to meet basic obligations, cause deep emotional fatigue, often manifesting as apathy towards doctors, peers, or supervisors.[10]

Digital overload

The proliferation of digital communication and remote work platforms, while enabling seamless connectivity, has also paved the way for 24/7 availability. This constant digital engagement blurs the boundaries between work and personal life. A less centralized workplace model leads to higher expectations for round-the-clock responsiveness, adding another layer of psychological burden.[11]

Lifestyle and health challenges

Sedentary habits and poor diet

Though the role appears mobile, MRs spend long durations waiting in clinics or stuck in traffic. These prolonged periods of inactivity, coupled with irregular eating schedules and reliance on processed foods, increase the risk for obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases.

Sleep deprivation and fatigue

Early hospital visits and delayed reporting hours lead to disturbed circadian rhythms and sleep patterns. Inadequate sleep impairs immunity, reduces cognitive sharpness, and significantly elevates the risk of chronic diseases. Additionally, digital eye strain (DES), also referred to as computer vision syndrome (CVS), is highly prevalent among those using multiple electronic devices for extended periods.[12]

Chronic stress and mental health issues

MRs operate under immense pressure to meet or exceed their targets. The constant fear of rejection, quota-based assessments, and navigating relationships with clients all contribute to high stress and anxiety levels. The mental strain of excessive workloads, the frustration from long clinic waits times, and a general sense of powerlessness often culminate in burnout.

Lack of preventive health practices

Ironically, despite advocating for better health among healthcare providers, MRs themselves frequently neglect regular medical check-ups. This neglect leads to the late

detection of potentially manageable conditions like hypertension and elevated blood sugar levels.

Proposed interventions

It is important to introduce and emphasize the concept of personal health stress—highlighting the disproportionate demand it places on the already stretched resources of MRs. This is especially pertinent because serious health conditions often exceed one's coping capacity.[13] MRs are indeed the unsung champions of the pharmaceutical world. While they are committed to promoting better healthcare outcomes, their own health frequently takes a back seat.

Health remains a leading cause of stress for 63% of adults.[14] In the words of Jim Rohn, "Unless you change how you are, you'll always have what you've got." We believe it's time to explore these personal and professional health challenges in detail and provide the tools necessary for MRs to lead more fulfilling lives.

How can we address the issue

Organizational support and structured wellness programs

Prolonged stress has a compounding effect, gradually leading to negative health and emotional outcomes. However, with proactive intervention, it is possible to reverse this cycle and create a culture of recurring gains.[15] Structured wellness programs encompassing nutrition consultations, fitness challenges, and compulsory health check-ups can bring about measurable improvements.

Whether through incentives or mandatory policies, organizations must actively promote healthier lifestyles. Should employees be rewarded for participating in wellness activities. Or should non-compliant behavior be penalized? Some programs require smokers or obese employees to pay higher insurance premiums unless they engage with wellness initiatives.[16]

Flexible work schedules

Reducing rigid work hours and allowing remote submissions can greatly improve work-life balance. Research suggests that working more than 40 hours a week leads to fatigue and declining job performance.[17] In countries where six-day work weeks are the norm, instituting two holidays a month (like the second and fourth Saturdays) can provide employees with valuable downtime. This facilitates rest, rejuvenation, and better family connections, contributing to long-term health and happiness.[18]

Travel safety initiatives

It's essential for pharmaceutical companies to take travel safety seriously. MRs should be equipped with emergency kits, basic first-aid knowledge, and proper health insurance. Their well-being on the road must be prioritized.[19]

Financial planning and guidance

Many MRs experience stress due to financial uncertainty. Organizing financial literacy workshops can be instrumental in reducing money-related anxiety. Knowledge of effective budgeting and saving strategies can empower employees to focus better on their professional responsibilities.[20]

Supervisor training

Leadership can play a pivotal role in burnout prevention. Managers must be trained to recognize early signs of stress and respond with empathy. A positive work culture, where MRs feel supported and valued, significantly lowers burnout rates.[21]

Nutrition and physical activity

Access to expert dietitians and user-friendly meal plans can encourage healthier food choices. Encouraging movement breaks or organizing step-count challenges can counteract sedentary habits. Reducing reliance on stimulants like caffeine and unhealthy fast food can also stabilize energy levels and moods. Sleep hygiene, despite irregular schedules, must be reinforced. Establishing a consistent rest routine can boost mental clarity. Encouraging digital detox practices and nurturing personal connections can also play a vital role in maintaining emotional well-being.

One effective strategy is Robin Sharma's "5 AM Club" philosophy, which includes 20 minutes of exercise, 20 minutes of reflection (through meditation or journaling), and 20 minutes of self-improvement. This morning routine can significantly reduce stress and maximize productivity.

Prioritizing mental health

Mental wellness must be normalized and integrated into the workplace. Companies should provide access to counseling services, conduct mental health workshops, and establish peer-support groups. Setting attainable sales goals, offering regular check-ins with supervisors, and introducing buddy systems can create a more emotionally resilient workforce.

Ergonomic and occupational health solutions

MRs frequently experience discomfort due to the physical demands of travel and equipment handling. Companies should offer ergonomic training on posture, lifting techniques, and travel ergonomics. Stress management workshops focusing on relaxation techniques. Periodic medical check-ups. Proper digital screen guidelines,

including the use of blue-light filters, anti-glare eyewear, and artificial tears.

A call for change

A healthy MR is not just more productive-they are also more engaged, more innovative, and more satisfied with their work. Companies must move wellness from a peripheral concern to a central business objective. Rather than merely offering generic health packages, we must provide personalized care and education tailored to the unique needs of MRs.

Burnout must be addressed at its roots, by reforming the workplace environment rather than blaming the worker.

Authors are inspired by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen's assertion that development should be measured not just by income but by the real capabilities and opportunities people have.[23] In alignment with this philosophy, MDF has made it its mission to organize regular wellness screenings every six months for this often-overlooked workforce. The aim is to monitor and enhance their health status through proven interventions.

Mental health support, mindfulness training, and relaxation techniques like breathing exercises will be at the heart of our initiatives. We believe that emotional stability begins with self-awareness. By guiding these professionals towards inner strength, we hope to empower them to lead healthier lives.

Our visionary campaign, "Screen for NCDs by twenty, add healthy years, a plenty, seeks to shift the age threshold of preventive screenings from 30 to 20, eventually expanding our outreach to adolescents through school-based health models.[24]

CONCLUSION

Burnout among medical representatives is a critical issue with far-reaching implications across public health, workforce efficiency, and economic development. Combatting this challenge calls for a coordinated, empathetic, and evidence-based approach-one that places the human being at the center of all strategies.

At the organizational level, pharmaceutical companies must evolve from a solely performance-focused culture to one that truly values well-being. At the societal level, we must remove the stigma around occupational stress and make mental health services more accessible. And at the individual level, MRs must be supported in prioritizing their health without the fear of professional setbacks.

Let us remember: "Screen for NCDs by twenty, add healthy years, a plenty." It's not just a tagline-it's our pledge to safeguard those who safeguard the healthcare system.

Funding: No funding sources
Conflict of interest: None declared
Ethical approval: Not required

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Cite this article as: Basu D, Ghosh S, Patra SK, Sinhababu S, Nath MS, Gandhi N, et al. The silent burnout and the burgeoning health crisis among medical sales representatives in India. Int J Community Med Public Health 2025;12:4181-5.