

# Stress makes medics ever gloomier

## NEW YORK

Did you wake up this morning feeling blue? If you're a medical researcher, the answer may well be yes. A survey of faculty members in US medical schools has revealed that as many as one in five report signs of depression.

Grumbles about spiralling stress are rife among researchers, but there have been few studies to gauge its effects in any field. So psychiatrist Barbara Schindler at Drexel University College of Medicine in Philadelphia and her team sent questionnaires to more than 3,500 faculty members in four US medical schools. The questions were part of established scales for measuring mental and physical health, as well as life and job satisfaction.

The team received responses from more than half of the academics, and published its results this month (B. A. Schindler *et al. Acad. Med.* 81, 27–34; 2006). The most striking finding is that some 20% of researchers, both male and female, show symptoms consistent with

clinical depression. This is roughly double the rate of such symptoms seen in the general population, and is a jump from the 14% found in a similar study in 1984.

Younger researchers show more depressive symptoms than older ones, and basic researchers feel less strain than those who also see patients. Although the survey is small, the authors say it exposes the toll that work is taking on academics' mental health. "When 20% of doctors are depressed you know something is wrong," Schindler says.

Researchers report various reasons for growing strain at work. Faculty members at US medical schools say they are under increasing pressure to see fee-paying patients. This leaves them less time to pursue the research and publications that win promotion. "I think these things mean there is less happiness and relaxation in medical schools," says George Mandel of George Washington University

Medical Center in Washington DC.

The repercussions are harder to predict. The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) in Washington DC reports no fall in the number of faculty members it can recruit,

**"When a fifth of doctors are depressed, something is wrong."**

or in the numbers dropping out. But increasing stress could be dissuading faculty members from carrying out research, says Kenneth Getz, whose work

at the Tufts Center for the Study of Drug Development in Boston suggests that the number of principal investigators leading clinical trials has declined in the past few years.

Diane Magrane, who is responsible for faculty development at the AAMC, says that many medical schools are already aware of poor staff morale and are introducing mentoring and support programmes to combat it. "When you measure it, it allows you to do something," she says. ■

**Helen Pearson**