



Schwartz Rounds: Supporting the emotional wellbeing of our future healthcare workforce

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ABSTRACT

There is a pressing need to increase the availability of emotional support to healthcare professionals in training and those in early career, in particular junior doctors. Schwartz Rounds provide a space for staff and students to reflect on the emotional impact of their work. The Rounds are a multidisciplinary forum for all staff and students working in healthcare settings. The key premise is that supporting healthcare staff and students' wellbeing, providing a way for them to gain insight into their feelings and those that they work with, helps them to work compassionately with patients. This article describes the current NHS context concerns for healthcare staff and students and provides information about Schwartz Rounds and how their counter-cultural nature can help to address current workforce challenges, especially in relation to medical students and junior doctors. Implications for research are discussed.

Introduction

At a time of both unprecedented demand on the NHS and considerable concern about the rapid attrition of newly qualified staff, there is an urgent need to provide emotional support across the healthcare workforce. Schwartz Rounds (<https://www.theschwartzcenter.org/programs/schwartz-rounds/>) provide a forum for reflective practice enabling healthcare students and staff to talk about the emotional impact of working in healthcare. Based originally on the concept of a Grand Round, staff across the whole healthcare organisation attend Schwartz Rounds which often run monthly. These are open facilitated groups, that are voluntary to attend. The Rounds have a key role to play to support students during clinical training and early career staff. This article asks what role can the availability of Schwartz Rounds play in supporting healthcare staff and students in the context of high levels of burnout, attrition during clinical training and a growing concern about the retention of newly qualified staff, especially junior doctors.

What happens in a Schwartz Round?

Preceded by food or refreshments for 30 minutes, a Schwartz Round lasts for one hour. Held in the workplace or an educational setting, following a welcome and introduction three storytellers begin by talking for five minutes, in turn, uninterrupted, on a pre-agreed theme – for example, 'A patient I will never forget' or 'In at the deep end'. The stories

focus on the emotional aspects of working in healthcare, rather than the clinical aspects of a case. Once the storytellers have spoken, the audience is invited to share their emotional reflections and similar experiences. Two trained facilitators help contain and shape the discussion. The facilitators hold preparatory meetings, prior to the Round, with the storytellers to support them in shaping their stories. Traditionally, Schwartz Rounds run face to face, however, since the beginning of the Covid19 pandemic, Rounds are also run online.

The impact of the current context

The current NHS context has created an urgent need to increase the availability of emotional support to healthcare professionals in training and those in early career. The NHS Staff Survey¹ found that 44.8% of the survey respondents had felt unwell due to work-related stress in the past 12 months and 37.4% found their work emotionally exhausting.¹ Unsurprisingly given this context, worrying numbers are leaving the professions of junior doctors² and nurses³ as well as other healthcare professional groups - 'The demands for more support for our health service are growing louder and more frantic, matching the increasing despair of many healthcare professionals'.⁴

The link between doctors' wellbeing and patient care is well-documented as is the association between being a junior doctor and the high risk of developing burnout.⁵ Such findings have led to calls to increase access to emotional support, including peer support reflective groups for junior doctors and in the curricula for medical education.⁵

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Schwartz Rounds: making the unbearable bearable

Schwartz Rounds can help to meet the need for more support.⁶ The Rounds are a specific type of multidisciplinary forum for all staff working in healthcare settings which provide a space to reflect together on the emotional impact of their work. The underlying premise of Rounds is that healthcare staff and students are more able to work compassionately with patients and colleagues when they have greater insight into their emotional responses and when they themselves feel cared for. Research has found that attendance at Schwartz Rounds is valued by medical students who rate the Rounds as having beneficial impact, helping to improve their self-awareness and insight and enabling the development of closer working relationships with colleagues through the Rounds via the discussion of shared experiences of the emotional impact of working in healthcare.⁷

Within the wider healthcare workforce, outcomes for staff attending Schwartz Rounds include a decrease in psychological distress compared to non-attenders^{6,8} as well as stable findings across studies that staff and students who attend Rounds have greater compassion for themselves and others, and improved teamwork.⁸

Schwartz Rounds are the legacy of Kenneth Schwartz, a healthcare lawyer living in Boston, USA, who, in 1994, was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. During his 10-month illness, he described how what mattered to him most as a patient were the simple acts of kindness from his caregivers. These helped to make *'the unbearable bearable'*.⁹ Before his death, he left a legacy for the establishment of the Schwartz Center in Boston to help foster compassionate healthcare. The Point of Care Foundation, a UK charity, provides organisations with the license, training and support to run Schwartz Rounds (<https://www.pointofcarefoundation.org.uk/our-programmes/staff-experience/>). Rounds are currently running in over 280 organisations in the UK and Ireland – predominantly in the NHS, but also in hospices, social care organisations and Higher Education Institutes.

A space to acknowledge and normalise strong emotions

Schwartz Rounds are beneficial in supporting healthcare students and newly qualified healthcare professionals by helping to normalise the strong emotions that arise from clinical work during training, and beyond. They also enable students and staff to have greater insight, compassion for and appreciation of the roles and work of other healthcare staff. The Rounds provide a space for the acknowledgement of healthcare students' and newly qualified healthcare professionals' experiences of liminality and the emotions that arise from the many necessary transitions that are a feature of healthcare training and early career work.

Integrating Schwartz Rounds in medical training

In some universities in the UK and Ireland, medical students, and other healthcare students, can attend Schwartz Rounds at their places of study during their preregistration training. At the beginning of 2024, a total of 47 UK universities were running Rounds for their healthcare students and this number is set to increase. Zervos & Gishen¹⁰ describe how Schwartz Rounds focus on *'the humanity in health care.'* They discuss how a focus on empathy is often countercultural to the emphasis on teaching of the science of the job and of the pressures that come with a drive for academic excellence and progression. With limited time during medical education, Schwartz Rounds give space for emotional connection and sharing and equip students with a potentially career-long ability to reflect on and talk about how they feel in the context of their work.

An organisational intervention

Crucial to the success of Schwartz Rounds is the support for them from senior managers and leaders – the Rounds are an organisational intervention, not an individual one. Locke & Carrieri's² integrative review of the factors contributing to the junior doctor workforce retention crisis in the UK led to many recommendations including several in the category of *'support and relationships'*. They highlight how difficult it is for junior doctors to talk about how they feel due to a worry that asking for help might be perceived as a sign of failure or clinical incompetence. The review recommends the need to improve on the accessibility, availability and acceptability of formal and informal support for junior doctors. The availability of Schwartz Rounds during pre-registration medical training and beyond, may help. Such measures do, of course, incur a cost.

With the estimated cost to the NHS of poor staff mental health and wellbeing of £12.1 billion per year, there is a call for initiatives that address the need for sustained and systemic change in organisational culture. A recent rapid evidence review and economic analysis of NHS staff wellbeing and mental health included Schwartz Rounds as one of its five case studies.¹¹ The rapid review's analysis of the relative cost of providing support for staff found that running Schwartz Rounds compared favourably and was relatively low-cost

A 'counter-cultural' reflective space

Whilst there is clearly no single solution to our current NHS workforce crisis, and especially the attrition of junior doctors, newly qualified nurses and other healthcare professionals, Schwartz Rounds make an important contribution.⁸ A national study of Schwartz Rounds in the NHS in England found that staff who attended Schwartz Rounds regularly showed a statistically significant improvement in their psychological wellbeing compared to staff who did not attend Rounds during the study time period.⁸ The study also found evidence for an organisational 'ripple effect' as a result of running Rounds which benefitted the wider system and organisational culture. Research and practice, demonstrates that Schwartz Rounds provide a safe, contained counter-cultural space within which the strong emotions that arise from working in healthcare for staff and students can be shared and acknowledged and form part of the pastoral supports on offer. As a relatively cost-effective staff support initiative, the Rounds are unique in being available to the entire healthcare workforce, clinical and non-clinical. Storytelling is at the heart of Schwartz Rounds which research shows is valued by those who attend, along with the clear focus on the emotional impact of working in healthcare with no requirement to problem solve or question/be questioned.

Future research directions

Anecdotal evidence suggests that junior doctors and other newly and recently qualified healthcare professionals who have attended Schwartz Rounds during their pre-registration training, feel the benefit in their early career stage. For example, recalling Schwartz Rounds stories during challenging moments on a shift early career appears to offer some crucial emotional protection. To recall a senior doctor crying or describing their anger and frustration when recounting a story in a Round, normalises feeling such strong emotions in a work context and helps the junior doctor in the moment to feel less alone. Whilst such outcomes are described anecdotally, further research is needed. This includes exploring the impact of attending Rounds for newly qualified and recently qualified healthcare professionals and understanding the underpinning psychological mechanisms at play. Such research can help to make the case for increasing access to Rounds as part of the emotional and psychological support available to the NHS workforce.

Conclusion

The current unprecedented levels of stress experienced by healthcare staff and students requires additional emotional supports to be put in place specially for certain key groups in the workforce such as junior doctors. Schwartz Rounds provide a space for emotional reflection and sharing that is different to the everyday experience of working in healthcare, supports staff and students and ultimately benefits patient care.

Declaration of competing interest

The author is employed by the Point of Care Foundation, a not-for profit charity that provides the license, training and support for Schwartz Rounds in the UK and Ireland.

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