



## Review article

# Burnout and work stress in radiology technicians: A narrative review

## Agotamiento psicológico y estrés laboral en técnicos en radiología: una revisión narrativa

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### ABSTRACT

This text addresses the issue of work-related stress in radiology technicians within the context of the rapid changes occurring in the health sector. Technological advancements, the increasing demand for services, and shifts in work organization have created an increasingly demanding work environment for healthcare professionals, including radiology technicians. Psychosocial factors prevalent in this work environment, such as excessive workloads, precarious working conditions, and a lack of recognition, are identified as the primary triggers of stress and burnout in these professionals. Prolonged exposure to these conditions can lead to a wide range of health problems, both physical and psychological, affecting the workers' quality of life and, consequently, the quality of medical care. This review demonstrates that work-related stress is a significant problem for radiology technicians, with consequences for individuals and organizations. It calls for further research and the implementation of measures to improve working conditions and promote the well-being of these professionals.

**Keywords:** Radiology; Work stress; Burnout; Quality of life; Work environment; Review.

### RESUMEN

El texto aborda la problemática del estrés laboral en técnicos de radiología, enmarcado en los cambios acelerados que experimenta el sector salud. Los avances tecnológicos, la creciente demanda de servicios y los cambios en la organización del trabajo han generado un entorno laboral cada vez más exigente para los profesionales de la salud, incluso para los técnicos en radiología. Los factores psicosociales presentes en el entorno laboral, como las cargas de trabajo excesivas, las condiciones laborales precarias y la falta de reconocimiento, se identifican como principales desencadenantes de estrés y agotamiento psicológico en estos profesionales. La exposición prolongada a estas condiciones puede generar una amplia gama de problemas de salud físicos y emocionales, los que afectan la calidad de vida de los trabajadores y la calidad de la atención médica. La revisión evidencia que el estrés laboral es un problema significativo para los técnicos en radiología, con consecuencias para los individuos y las organizaciones. Se hace un llamado a la investigación y a la implementación de medidas para mejorar las condiciones laborales y promover el bienestar de estos profesionales.

**Palabras clave:** radiología; estrés laboral; agotamiento psicológico; calidad de vida; entorno laboral; revisión.

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## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary health systems are undergoing an accelerated transformation driven by demographic, social, and epidemiological changes and unprecedented technological advances.<sup>1</sup> This evolving dynamic generates a series of challenges for health professionals, who face greater complexity in their functions, an increasing demand for services, and the need for constant updating of their skills. Likewise, modifications are observed in the organization of work, including longer working hours, job insecurity, and a negative impact on the psychosocial health of workers.<sup>2</sup>

In context, there is a growing interest in the study of psychosocial factors present in work scenarios related to work organization, such as position type, task performance, and environment, all of which influence workers' health.<sup>3</sup> Psychosocial factors can positively or negatively affect work activity and individuals' quality of life. Positive factors promote personal growth, while negative factors constitute a health risk, manifesting as work stress and potentially causing psychological, physical, or social harm.<sup>1</sup>

Studies conducted in various work sectors, including healthcare, have shown that chronic work stress is associated with an increased risk of developing a wide range of health problems, such as cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, depression, substance abuse, psychiatric disorders, burnout syndrome, and a lower subjective perception of health.<sup>4-6</sup>

The healthcare sector has continuously changed in economic, socio-political, and technical-scientific spheres. Furthermore, the trend toward organizational competitiveness can hinder the development of social support among colleagues. Compounding this are the economic situation in Latin America and the underestimation of professions, factors that influence professionals' behavior, adaptation, and flexibility. Specifically, radiology services have implemented new management forms focused on maximizing production and profits, adopting advanced technologies, and maintaining salary policies that do not correspond to their workers' qualifications, particularly radiology technicians.<sup>7</sup> This context can lead to the emergence of occupational diseases, work stress, and even burnout syndrome.<sup>8</sup> Exposure to psychosocial risks affects workers' health and hurts organizations, resulting in lower job satisfaction, increased absenteeism, workplace accidents, and more significant staff turnover.<sup>9</sup> These consequences may, in turn, compromise the quality of services offered.

The hospital environment's dynamics impose high work stress levels on radiology technicians. Most care in the healthcare setting is geared towards patient care, making interaction with patients and their families critical.<sup>10,11</sup> Several studies indicate a strong connection between work stress and responsibility towards patients. The relationship between healthcare professionals and patients entails profound emotional experiences, some very rewarding and others emotionally exhausting.<sup>12,13</sup> Although interaction with patients is not usually as prolonged for radiology technicians as for other professionals, tensions that can sometimes be overwhelming and lead to burnout syndrome are still generated.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the purpose of this study is to review the existing evidence in the scientific literature on the working conditions of radiology technicians, with a particular focus on burnout and work stress.

## FUNCTION AND EMPLOYMENT STATUS

Radiology technicians base their role on medical imaging through various technologies, from X-rays to MRI. Their work is essential in the accurate diagnosis of diseases and the design of treatments. Using tools such as ultrasounds, computed tomography scans, and radioactive materials, these professionals contribute significantly to medical care, representing between 4% and 7% of health personnel in

countries such as the United States, Canada, and Mexico.<sup>14-19</sup> In addition to recruitment challenges, many Asian countries face difficulties retaining health professionals, such as attending physicians and radiologists. Global competition for medical talent and factors such as job dissatisfaction, burnout, and understaffing contribute to this problem. To ensure quality and sustainable healthcare, healthcare institutions must develop effective strategies to retain their employees.<sup>17,18</sup> For this reason, Matalon *et al.*<sup>20</sup> propose the creation of more attractive work environments that respond to the needs of professionals and promote their professional development. Research is also needed to identify and address occupational stressors that affect health worker satisfaction, particularly those engaged in medical imaging.

## BURNOUT

The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined burnout as a chronic syndrome derived from prolonged and unmanaged work stress.<sup>21</sup> This phenomenon has spread alarmingly among health professionals, with prevalence rates exceeding 50%.<sup>22,23</sup> In fact, radiologists report significantly higher burnout levels than doctors in other specialties.<sup>22,24</sup> According to Maslach *et al.*,<sup>25,26</sup> burnout manifests itself through three interrelated dimensions: emotional exhaustion, characterized by feelings of fatigue, exhaustion, and emotional depletion; depersonalization, which is expressed as a cynical and distant attitude towards work and patients; and reduced personal accomplishment, which is reflected in feelings of incompetence and dissatisfaction with professional achievements.

Burnout in the healthcare sector not only compromises healthcare quality by increasing medical errors and malpractice lawsuits,<sup>27,28</sup> it also decreases patient satisfaction and negatively impacts service delivery.<sup>29-32</sup> The personal consequences of burnout can be devastating, including substance abuse and suicide.<sup>33</sup> While remote work, adopted as a temporary measure during the pandemic, has demonstrated multiple benefits,<sup>30</sup> it has also introduced new challenges that can exacerbate burnout, such as a lack of social interaction and distractions from the home environment.<sup>34</sup> Burnout is a complex problem that arises from a combination of factors, including excessive workloads, inefficient processes, administrative obligations, work-life imbalance, lack of participation in decision-making, and an unfavorable organizational culture.<sup>35</sup>

The areas of radiology are not exempt from the growing problem of professional burnout. Recent studies have shown that residents and established radiologists experience high work stress and burnout levels.<sup>36,37</sup> In fact, it is estimated that between 54% and 72% of diagnostic and interventional radiologists have symptoms compatible with burnout syndrome.<sup>38</sup> A significant increase in workload exacerbates this situation, as well as the imposition of increasingly tight deadlines for the delivery of reports and the multiplication of clinical and administrative professional responsibilities.<sup>36</sup> Staff shortages further exacerbate this problem, contributing to a widespread sense of work overload.<sup>39</sup>

The current configuration of the medical work environment, characterized by a high concentration of professionals in large institutions such as academic medical centers, health maintenance organizations, and large hospital groups, represents an additional risk factor for the development of burnout syndrome among radiologists.<sup>40</sup> This predominantly hierarchical and bureaucratic organizational model is often associated with ineffective and outdated management practices and intense pressure for profitability and cost containment. These working conditions, marked by limited professional autonomy and an organizational culture focused on short-term results, can generate a feeling of dehumanization and alienation among health professionals, contributing to burnout.<sup>40,41</sup>

While remote work has been explored as a possible solution to reduce stress in radiology, its implementation in clinical practice presents significant challenges, especially in the case of interventional radiology. The procedural nature of this specialty, which requires direct interaction with the patient and the use of specialized equipment, limits the possibility of performing these tasks remotely.<sup>42</sup> In addition, the lack of clarity regarding the role of interventional radiologists within large health systems, often perceived as technicians rather than doctors, can lead to additional stress and negatively affect their professional performance.<sup>43</sup>

## WORK STRESS

Stress, a typical response to various life situations, manifests in a particular way in the workplace, generating negative consequences for workers and organizations. If prolonged, this physiological and psychological response can deteriorate employees' physical and mental health, affecting their quality of life and, consequently, their work performance. Work-related stress can translate into decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and higher staff turnover, generating significant economic losses for companies.<sup>44</sup>

According to the WHO, work stress arises as a response to work demands that exceed an individual's capabilities.<sup>45</sup> This definition is complemented by the contributions of other authors, such as Tobal *et al.*,<sup>46</sup> describe stress as a set of complex reactions to adverse work situations. Together, these perspectives allow us to understand work stress as a multifactorial phenomenon involving physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects that can manifest itself chronically or acutely, generating negative consequences for both the individual and the organization.<sup>44</sup>

According to Miranda,<sup>47</sup> work stress is not homogeneous but varies depending on each worker's characteristics. Thus, the author distinguishes between acute work-related stress, which manifests as an intense and temporary response to demanding situations, and chronic work-related stress, which persists over time and can generate long-term consequences for the worker's health and well-being. This classification highlights the importance of considering the individual response to stressful situations and the need to adopt personalized coping strategies.

In today's context, the accuracy and efficiency of healthcare depend heavily on the precise interpretation of medical images, a critical task that falls to radiologists.<sup>48</sup> The increasing complexity of cases and rapid technological advances have significantly increased the workload of these professionals, who must also contend with increasing bureaucracy and documentation.<sup>49</sup> Radiology resident physicians, in particular, are at a crucial stage of their training, characterized by an intense workload, high academic expectations, and relatively low remuneration. This situation underscores the need to ensure the physical and psychological well-being of future radiologists to guarantee quality training and sustainable professional practice.<sup>50</sup>

Several studies have shown a direct relationship between work stress and the deterioration of professional performance.<sup>51-53</sup> Prolonged exposure to stressful situations can decrease motivation, concentration, and the ability to make effective decisions, negatively affecting the quality of work performed. For radiologists, stress can influence the accuracy of diagnoses and consequently compromise patient safety.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, radiology technicians experience high levels of stress that affect not only their physical and mental health but also their job satisfaction.<sup>55,56</sup> However, despite the existing evidence on the impact of stress on other healthcare professionals, further research is still required to fully understand the consequences of stress on the specific performance of radiologists.

## BURNOUT AND RISK FACTORS

Burnout syndrome in radiologists has increased significantly, evidenced by the increase in its prevalence.<sup>57</sup> Before the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately one-third of radiologists were experiencing burnout.<sup>58</sup> During the pandemic, this figure increased to half of the professionals. In the United States, burnout in radiologists rose from 36% in 2013 to 46% in 2020.<sup>59,60</sup> These data suggest that the pandemic exacerbated an already existing problem in this population.

The findings of various investigations suggest several notable trends in identifying factors contributing to such occupational risks: first, workload, work shifts, interruptions, and patient-related factors appeared to play a more prominent role in contributing to occupational risks compared to factors specific to the technician or organizational structure.<sup>57-59</sup>

Some research, such as Luceño-Moreno *et al.*<sup>61</sup> and Torrente *et al.*<sup>62</sup> have associated emotional exhaustion and depersonalization with symptoms of anxiety in women and depression in men; however, in the study, Oprisan *et al.*,<sup>57</sup> no correlation was found with gender or other sociodemographic and labor factors; nor were constant risk or protection factors identified before and after the pandemic. For its part, Chen *et al.*<sup>63</sup> noted that working as an abdomen and pelvis radiologist could be a protective factor, although they make it clear that more research is required to confirm this relationship.

Professional burnout in radiologists is a complex phenomenon, and it is not easy to associate with specific characteristics since their relationship can vary over time. Lack of motivation could be related to an approach focused on diagnostic imaging rather than comprehensive patient care.<sup>57</sup> The European Society of Radiology proposes a shift towards a value-based practice, where the radiologist has a more active role.<sup>64</sup>

In addition to the stress factors previously mentioned, Alshamrani *et al.*<sup>65</sup> found that a rigid leadership style and disparities in employee treatment increased 68% of occupational risks; understaffing and lack of adequate radiation protection devices, mentioned by more than half of respondents and high workloads, long working hours, and physically demanding tasks. Also, it was found that frequent interaction with infectious or emotionally unstable patients and fear of making mistakes, such as dangers related to patient interaction and safety, are stress causes.

Moreover, 84% of the study group suggested improvements in service organization, and proposals to improve mood included reducing workload and the number of on-call shifts and establishing explicit daily activities for each professional.<sup>65</sup>

The above reveals the need for multifaceted solutions. In the Medscape Survey,<sup>66</sup> radiology ranked 18th in professional burnout, with 36% of affectation, which rose to 46% in 2020, placing it sixth. This frequency is particularly worrisome since radiology is considered a specialty of high intellectual demand and the third in time and effort for diagnosis, after emergency medicine and internal medicine.<sup>67</sup>

## PRACTICAL ISSUES

Work-related stress is a significant challenge for radiology professionals. Despite the importance of their role in healthcare, radiologists face several stressors that negatively impact their well-being and professional performance. The combination of high workloads, tight deadlines, increasing administrative responsibilities, and an often-demanding organizational culture contributes to the development of burnout syndrome.<sup>68</sup>

The consequences of work-related stress in radiology are multifaceted and range from the deterioration of professionals' physical and mental health to the decrease in the quality of medical care. Emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal fulfillment are common symptoms of burnout in this professional group. In addition, work-related stress can negatively affect the accuracy of diagnoses and decision-making, putting patient safety at risk.<sup>69</sup>

Comprehensive strategies must be implemented to promote the well-being of radiologists and improve working conditions in the medical imaging sector.<sup>70</sup> These strategies include optimizing work processes, reducing administrative burdens, implementing stress management training programs, promoting a healthier organizational culture, and strengthening social support systems.<sup>69</sup>

The consequences of this stress and burnout are far-reaching, impacting not only the well-being of these professionals – potentially leading to decreased job satisfaction, increased errors, and even severe personal issues – but also the quality of patient care through reduced accuracy in diagnoses and decreased service delivery. While remote work presents potential benefits, its applicability in specialties like interventional radiology is limited.<sup>65</sup>

Addressing this critical issue requires multifaceted solutions, including optimizing work processes, reducing administrative burdens, implementing stress management programs, fostering supportive organizational cultures, and promoting a shift toward value-based practice that recognizes the integral role of radiologists in comprehensive patient care. Further research is also crucial to fully understand the specific stressors affecting radiology professionals and to develop targeted interventions that ensure a sustainable and high-quality healthcare system.<sup>70</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The vital role of radiology professionals is increasingly challenged by significant work-related stress and burnout. This phenomenon, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, is alarmingly prevalent among radiologists and radiology technicians, exceeding rates in other medical specialties. It is exacerbated by high workloads, tight deadlines, administrative burdens, staffing shortages, and demanding organizational cultures.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

**GMN** participated in the conceptualization, bibliographic review, writing, and final approval of the manuscript.

**LAA** drafted and approved the manuscript.

**YCT** participated in the bibliographic review and final approval of the manuscript.

**DLP** participated in database search and final approval of the manuscript.

**DGM** participated in database search, writing, and final approval of the manuscript.

**MTT** participated in database search, writing, and final approval of the manuscript.

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