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Burnout Rates in Undergraduate Athletic Training Students Compared to the Burnout Rate of Certified Athletic Trainers: A Comparative Study

Aaron J. Wass and Michael S. Weller

ABSTRACT

Burnout was first described in 1974 (Chen, 1974) since then the condition has been researched and studied numerous times. The health care field has experienced this condition at a very high rate one, and Athletic Training (AT) is no exception. This has been prevalent in the health care field because of the high stress situations, heavy workload, and emotionally draining work environment. The profession of Athletic Training has been significantly affected by this condition; many Athletic Trainers (AT) experience burnout over the course of a career (Chen, 1974). AT has been affected by burnout personally, known a colleague who has struggled with burnout, or even successfully to burnout and changed profession (Chen, 1974). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to assess the level of burnout in undergraduate AT students compared to the level of burnout in Certified Athletic Trainers. Undergraduate AT students (ATSs) and ATCs were surveyed using a Medicall Burgen Inventory (MBI) and basic demographic items to assess level of burnout and to compare the two groups to find any correlation. This study determined that ATS and ATC have a comparable level of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. The information from this study must be applied by ATs in order to better prepare students for the clinical setting not only in care of athletes, but in care for themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Burnout has been a largely studied condition in recent years, many articles have been written on the subject of Burnout (Girard, 2013). Burnout has been described by Freudenberger (Cherpill, 2008). This condition has become a large problem for all healthcare facilities (Girard, 2013). AT is not exempt from this problem. This study not only describes the existence of burnout but explains the reason for its existence.

METHODS

In this study, the population of interest was all the Certified Athletic Trainers (CART) and University Athletic Trainers (UAT) who were employed in the state of Ohio for at least one year in the 2013-2014 academic year. The sample size was set to 80, 40 ATCs, and 40 ATSs.

RESULTS

The first subscale of the MBI determines the level of emotional exhaustion experienced by the participants. Examples of items addressing this are “I feel frustrated by my job” and “I feel my work isn’t appreciated by my employer.” The mean score of this subscale was high for professionals and students, each year surveyed, but there was no statistical significance (p=0.488) between the scores, which indicates all groups experience this at the same rate. There was not a statistically significant difference between professional male and female student emotional exhaustion (p=0.90). The independent t-test done on male and female student emotional exhaustion showed a statistically significant difference (p=0.013) indicating that male students experienced a lower degree of emotional exhaustion.

The second subscale of the MBI is used to determine the frequency in which an individual has an interpersonal response to another’s need, care, or treatment. Examples of items addressing this are “I have become more callous towards people since taking this job” and “I do not really care what happens to some clients.” Mean scores for depersonalization were both in the moderate range for professionals and all levels of students (2nd, 3rd, and 4th year). The one-way ANOVA confirmed that there was not a statistical significant difference in the scores (p=0.194). Independent t-test on male and female professionals in regards to depersonalization indicated no statistically significant difference (p=0.44). The independent t-test performed on male and female student depersonalization also showed no statistically significant difference (p=0.194).

The third and final subscale of the MBI is used to determine feelings of personal accomplishment. This subscale is scored in the reverse of the first two, meaning that a higher score indicates lower levels of burnout. The one-way ANOVA on professionals and students revealed no statistically significant difference (p=0.757) which indicated that all groups had high levels of personal accomplishment. Independent t-test on male and female professionals did not reveal any statistically significant differences (p=0.816). However, the independent t-test comparing male and female student showed a statistically significant difference (p=0.029 and p=0.204). Female students were shown to have higher levels of personal accomplishment than male students.

CONCLUSION

A one way ANOVA was performed to test for difference between students(2nd, 3rd, and 4th year) and professionals, and independent t-tests were done to determine gender differences on the three subscales of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. The p-value for each test was set at p<0.05. All 66 students and 13 professionals completed the survey and gave informed consent. The Machish Burnout index was used to assess the level of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Each individual MBI was scored and recorded to be input for statistical analysis.

The study revealed that the average hours worked in a week was 50 per work week. Sport coverage for ATCs included soccer, baseball, basketball, softball, volleyball, Cross Country, Track and Field, and football, while only 5 ATCs reported having no clinical coverage responsibilities.

The independence of one’s job can be a contributing factor to burnout (Mazzeo, 2001). All 66 students had an average of 15 credit hours and for fourth year students 14.7 credit hours. 52% of students had clinical rotations on-campus, while 48% of students had clinical rotations off-campus.

The second facet of the MBI is used to determine the frequency in which an individual has an interpersonal response to another’s need, care, or treatment. Examples of items addressing this are “I have become more callous towards people since taking this job” and “I do not really care what happens to some clients.” Mean scores for depersonalization were both in the moderate range for professionals and all levels of students (2nd, 3rd, and 4th year). The one-way ANOVA confirmed that there was not a statistical significant difference in the scores (p=0.194). Independent t-test on male and female professionals in regards to depersonalization indicated no statistically significant difference (p=0.44). The independent t-test performed on male and female student depersonalization also showed no statistically significant difference (p=0.194).

DISCUSSION

Students were asked how many years they had been a Certified Athletic Trainer. The second subscale of the MBI is used to determine the frequency in which an individual has an interpersonal response to another’s need, care, or treatment. Examples of items addressing this are “I have become more callous towards people since taking this job” and “I do not really care what happens to some clients.” Mean scores for depersonalization were both in the moderate range for professionals and all levels of students (2nd, 3rd, and 4th year). The one-way ANOVA confirmed that there was not a statistical significant difference in the scores (p=0.194). Independent t-test on male and female professionals in regards to depersonalization indicated no statistically significant difference (p=0.44). The independent t-test performed on male and female student depersonalization also showed no statistically significant difference (p=0.194).

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CONCLUSION

The MBI data has been examined using statistical analysis, showing that there is not a statistically significant difference in any of the three subscales of burnout for students when compared to professionals. Both groups exhibited scores in the high range for emotional exhaustion, the moderate range for depersonalization and the high range for personal accomplishment, a high score is indicative of lower burnout. The qualitative data when compared showed that, although vastly different in responsibilities, professionals have much more administrative responsibilities, as well as the need to provide for themselves or family members, students however must attend classes, complete coursework, as well as attend to clinical responsibilities, which can entail some administrative work in the Athletic Training area (e.g., reports, publications, forms, data entry). When comparing work load, ATCs works an average of 50 hours per week, while the student averages 23.12 hours. However the student also must attend classes, an average credit load of 13.73, this when coupled with clinical responsibilities may contribute to student burnout. Factors that could contribute to student burnout can be divided into three groups: clinical responsibilities, coursework, and class load. The clinical responsibilities can be very stressful to students, as seen in the MBI. Clinical responsibilities include travel with teams, which may cause students to miss classes, as well as the necessity to teach themselves material; however these responsibilities can also be rewarding, as evidenced by the high personal accomplishment advocation. However, these rewarding responsibilities can also be discouraging, for students and professionals alike. This work was done because once students are done with clinical responsibilities for the day, they must then return to life as a normal student, this means, projects, term papers, and preparation for examinations or if an AT is travelling they must do coursework on the road, often on a bus trip, or in a hotel lobby. Often students will have projects in one class, where they must collaborate with other ATs, which can be tedious due to differing clinical schedules. Class load may be another factor not only because of busy schedule but also difficult subject material and demands on students from multiple credit hour courses.

This study was limited in comparison by lack of qualitative questions from which to draw common themes, which could be used to contrast concerns for ATSs and ATCs. Sample size was also a limitation for this study, as ATC numbers, particularly ATEP directors who do not have clinical responsibilities, could skew the overall data. A pre-post test design would have been beneficial in determining how large an effect coursework has on students, as in the semester students may have coursework responsibilities to attend to.