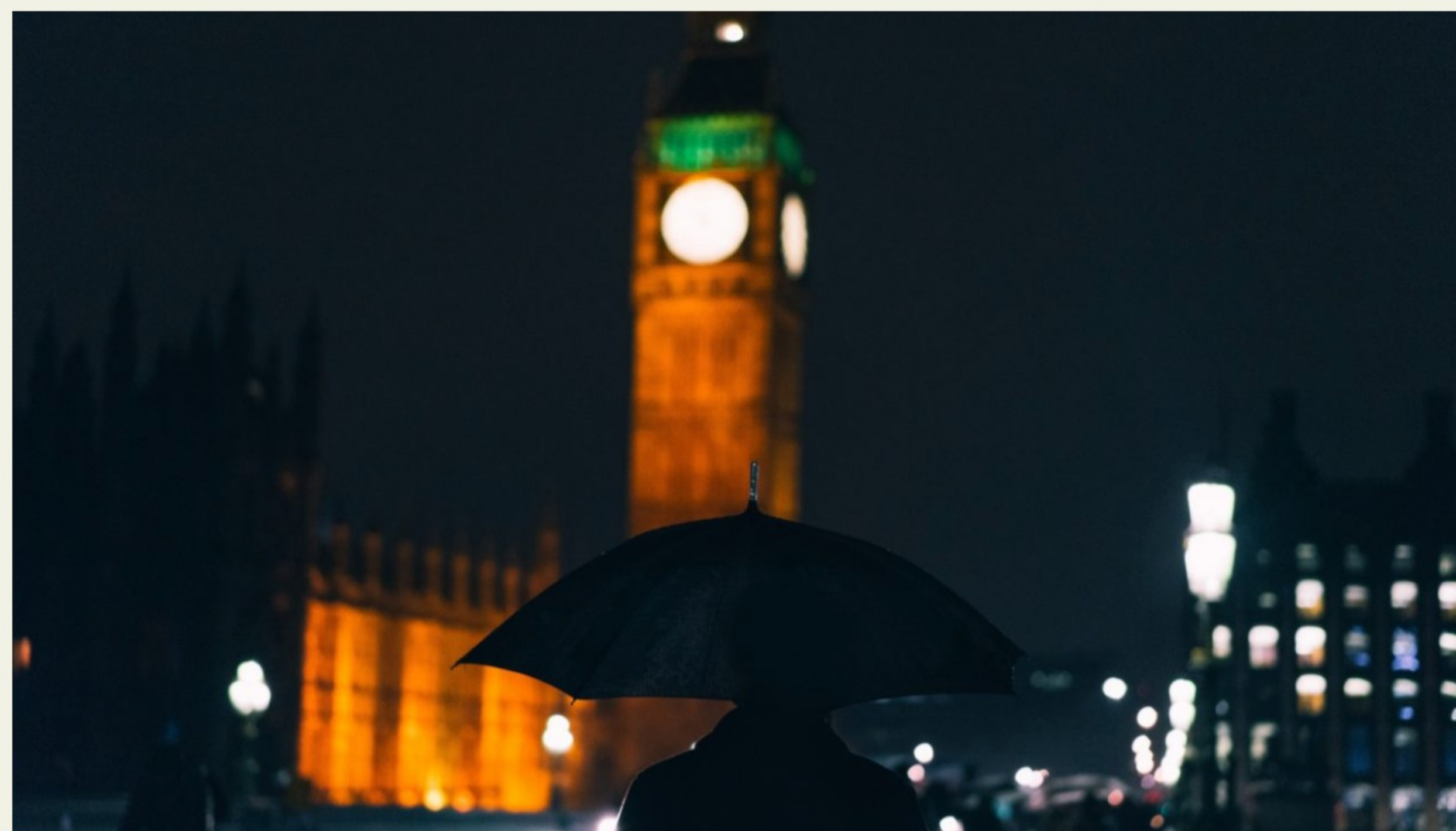


‘WE’VE SEEN ALMOST AN 100% INCREASE’: THE SURGE AT DOCTORS’ SUPPORT SERVICES IN 2020

25th January 2021 by NASGP

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Dr Helen Garr works as a GP, and she’s also the clinical lead for NHS Practitioner Health. Practitioner Health is a free, confidential NHS service for doctors who’ve experienced mental health problems that have disrupted their work, and who are looking for support to return to practice.

Dr Garr says the service has seen a huge, ‘almost 100%’ increase of doctors presenting – with around three in five clients coming from general practice.

In an exclusive interview with NASGP, Dr Garr reflects on the higher prevalence of burnout in GP locums, and how peer support networks like GP locum chambers can protect a doctor’s career and wellbeing.

Q: What experience have you had with sessional GPs this year?

We are currently seeing a huge increase in numbers of doctors presenting to NHS Practitioner Health, almost a 100% increase compared to pre-pandemic levels with GPs, including locum and salaried doctors, making up around 60% of numbers. The most common reason doctors are seeking help right now is with symptoms of anxiety, low mood, burnout, feeling overwhelmed, distress and symptoms indistinguishable from PTSD. We are also seeing themes of exhaustion, guilt and fear.

As the type and availability of work open to GP locums has changed many are finding themselves working in areas they would not ordinarily have chosen, many are taking on salaried roles for example due to necessity rather than choice.

We must remember that GP locums become locums for a myriad of reasons, often the need for autonomy over workload and workplace due to health or caring responsibilities. When that autonomy is removed that can have significant negative effects on mental health and wellbeing.

Q: There is perceived to be a higher prevalence of experience of burnout in GP locums – so that might be the reason why people became locums in the first place. Have you noticed this?

Yes. We know that despite common misconceptions, financial drive is often not the main reason doctors chose to become GP locums. The decision to locum is often to accommodate caring responsibilities – to care for children or parents, or, for the “squeezed middle”, both.

GP locum work is often chosen as it allows for greater autonomy over the working environment, working days and workloads. Doctors who may be facing or have experienced burnout may often chose this type of working in order to mitigate the factors that have contributed to their burnout. Certainly at Practitioner Health we are hearing from doctors who have entered back into the salaried workforce to achieve financial stability who are worried that they may be heading right back into those very conditions that contributed to that burnout in the first place.

Q: Can peer support protect GP locums from burnout?

Absolutely. GP locums are the orphans of medicine. They have no anchor. We know from trauma work, one of the strongest protective factors in protecting our mental health is social support and peer support. And that’s one of the things that GP locums are often missing out on, they don’t have that anchor, that regular body of peer support or colleagues around them if they’re moving from place to place.

Locum chambers can really play a huge part in giving GP locums that anchor of colleagues who they can connect with, develop relationships with and get that kind of peer support that they wouldn’t get otherwise. Access to peer support groups can work very well for protecting our mental health and maintaining our wellbeing.

[Join an NASGP locum chambers today.](#)

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Dr Selina Shaw, Buckinghamshire

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