The COVID-19 emergency’s over, but 1 in 2 doctors report burnout

JUN 23, 2023

Sara Berg, MS
Senior News Writer
Physicians play an irreplaceable role in preserving and enhancing the health and well-being of countless individuals. They are the trusted guardians of life, shouldering immense responsibilities and working tirelessly to deliver quality care. But beneath their white coats lies an epidemic that so many continue to struggle with: physician burnout.

And it reached an all-time high in 2021 with COVID-19 death rates up significantly from the year before, new SARS-CoV-2 variants emerging and large numbers of Americans who refused to get vaccinated or boosted. But with COVID-19 moving into a less deadly, endemic stage last year, it appears physicians across the country saw some relief in their stress levels, according to an exclusive survey from the AMA.

More than 13,000 responses from physicians and nonphysician providers across 30 states were received from more than 70 health systems who participated in the AMA’s Organizational Biopsy™ (PDF). The AMA benchmarking report—which is exclusive data to the AMA that is not published anywhere else—reflects 2022 trends in six key performance indicators—job satisfaction, job stress, burnout, intent to leave an organization, feeling valued by an organization and total hours spent per week on work-related activities (known as “time spend”).

The purpose of the aggregated data is to provide a national summary of organizational well-being and to serve as a comparison for other health care organizations. The results may be limited by the health systems that chose to participate.

For 2022, the overall burnout rate was 53%. While data from the AMA’s benchmarking report includes signs that physician burnout has fallen since its peak in late 2021, the extent of the problem is a startling reality that demands attention, especially among those who are at highest risk.

“We can’t say with certainty the exact cause of the decline, but it’s important to note that the rise in burnout during 2021 happened during significant COVID-19 surges—Delta and Omicron, respectively. Those surges put enormous pressure on an already stressed health system,” said Nancy Nankivil, director of practice transformation at the AMA. “Apart from a decrease in COVID-19 as vaccines were
introduced, we also saw more organizations paying attention to—and investing in—the well-being of their workforce.”

Since 2011, the AMA, Mayo Clinic and Stanford Medicine have conducted triennial surveys that have charted the physician burnout epidemic at different moments in time, most recently the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. While most questions are the same, these figures cannot be directly compared because there is a different group of respondents. Nevertheless, they shed light on the ongoing burnout epidemic.

“Continued leadership investment in workforce well-being—including efforts to lessen administrative burden on physicians—will be necessary to further reduce burnout,” Nankivil said.

Here are the other key performance indicators of physician well-being highlighted in the AMA benchmarking report.

**Job satisfaction dropped**

Between 2021 and 2022, physicians’ job satisfaction dropped to 68%. While still relatively high, it remained slightly below the job satisfaction rates of nurse practitioners and physician assistants. The AMA benchmarking report also provided insights into variations across gender, physician specialty and years in practice. Those figures will be published in upcoming AMA news articles.

“Organizations can work with the AMA to measure burnout and organizational drivers of burnout through the AMA’s Organizational Biopsy,” Nankivil said, noting this data “will provide important information about system-level drivers and where an organization can apply intervention efforts. We can't improve what we don't measure.”

Reducing physician burnout is a critical component of the AMA Recovery Plan for America’s Physicians.

Far too many American physicians experience burnout. That’s why the AMA develops resources that prioritize well-being and highlight workflow changes so physicians can focus on what matters—patient care.

For example, the AMA Joy in Medicine™ Health System Recognition Program provides an evidence-based framework and strategic road map for organizations to develop short and long-term strategies to improve physician well-being.
There’s an increase in job stress

Throughout 2022, physicians continued to experience job stress. Even as the impact of the pandemic lessened, 56% of physicians reported high levels of job stress.

The primary stressor according to respondents is a need for better staffing ratios and more help from support staff, such as medical assistants to reduce physician workload. But physicians are spending 58.6 hours each week on work-related tasks such as direct patient care, indirect patient care, administrative tasks, teaching and research. This is higher than other health professionals surveyed. And it can contribute to adverse personal health outcomes, according to a recent study co-authored by the AMA.

These data from the AMA’s benchmarking report provides “a foundation by which health systems can move the needle on workforce well-being,” the AMA’s Nankivil said. The information “specifically provides us with high-opportunity areas for investment and change,” allowing the AMA to tailor its resources to support health care leaders as they move to better tackle the systemic drivers of burnout.

“It will be important to continue to monitor these data so that health system and well-being leaders can adjust their strategies accordingly and identify sustainable improvements,” she added.

Learn how the AMA Health System Program partners with health care leaders to tailor solutions that maximize support for physicians and care teams.

Many intend to leave their roles

Physician respondents also indicated intent to leave their current organization within two years. When asked about the likelihood of leaving, 40% of physicians responded with moderate, likely and definitely.

Additionally, 46% of physicians expressed feeling valued by their organization to a great extent or moderately. Eighteen percent did not feel valued at all by their organization, which aligns with other health professionals surveyed. It is important to note that as feelings of value decrease, intentions to leave increase, which is a key finding for many health systems concerned about retention.

This trove of data represents “the voice of physicians and will help organizational leaders better target system drivers to improve well-being,” Nankivil said, noting that it “provides a North Star for where organizations can focus their efforts in the year ahead.”
In the coming year, the AMA survey will offer benchmarks in areas such as leadership behaviors, paid time off and barriers to mental health care.

“Many health care organizations and leaders are investing in this issue. Each year, we see more organizations strategically invest in this work by way of hiring chief wellness officers, leveraging EHR data, and making rapid changes to address workflow and workload issues,” Nankivil said. “These issues won’t be resolved overnight but we are honored to work with hundreds of health systems each year who are taking critical steps toward improved organizational well-being.”

Also, to stay connected to issues impacting organizational well-being and professional satisfaction, consider attending the 2023 American Conference on Physician Health.