

Once endangered, doctors' lounge revived to battle burnout

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As the toll of physician burnout rises, health care organizations are examining many ways to provide resources to support doctors' well-being. A sense of community and workplace connectedness is often cited as an important factor for keeping physicians, residents and medical students engaged, positive and more resistant to burnout.

Diane Sliwka, MD, hospitalist and professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) School of Medicine, found a simple and cost-effective way of promoting these values: investing in a modern doctors' lounge.

"When we surveyed our own physician work experience, we found a need people kept bringing up was that there wasn't a space for physicians to come together and get away from the action of work," said Dr. Sliwka. Based on the write-in results and interviews following a 2014 survey, Dr. Sliwka and her colleagues set out to create a space dedicated to giving the physicians at UCSF Medical Center a space to work quietly or hang out and socialize.

"I'd say it's been one of the most popular interventions we've made to improve the physician work experience," said Dr. Sliwka.



The new physicians' lounge at UCSF was designed based on what survey participants said they wanted—a mix of workstations and comfortable rest areas, high-quality refreshments, chargers for electronics and a printer, among other things. However, Dr. Sliwka believes the success of the new lounge isn't so much in the amenities themselves as the physicians' recognition of the effort being made on their behalf and the feeling of ownership over a space meant just for them.

“What people tell me they are excited about is that they feel like they're being taken care of. We aren't used to having a nice space that's just for doctors and not anyone else,” said Dr. Sliwka.

“The connectedness fostered by the lounge is in part an antidote to some of the burnout and struggle that people feel like they deal with every day.”

Now that physicians from different departments have a common area they share, many of them are becoming reacquainted with their colleagues.

“They are really enjoying the connections being made,” said Dr. Sliwka. “They find people from other departments that they've never actually met even if they know each other's names from having patients in common. They'll end up in conversations with each other in ways that they never would have otherwise.”

Dr. Sliwka attributed some of this rediscovery to the realities of modern medicine. “People are increasingly busy, and that factor, plus technology and geographic dispersion, over time leads to this feeling of disconnection.” This likely contributes to the feeling of isolation that many physicians struggle with.

“We expect that doctors work together, but in many cases, we don't actually work together—people are seeing their own patients and doing their own work and it's less and less common that people are coming together,” she said.

“Deliberately creating time and space for connection at work is one of the multiple strategies needed to address the burnout problem, yet often overlooked for its simplicity,” said Dr. Sliwka.

Taking a minute to have lunch, or sit face to face over a coffee can feel like an indulgence in our work.

“When you feel like there are so many priorities hanging over your head or you’re so behind and you still have to go home and do charting for hours and your family misses you because you’ve been working long hours, doing something that feels indulgent does not get prioritized,” Dr. Sliwka said. “Intentionally creating time and space for connection in the workplace can help. When people make a connection, they remember the value of how good it feels to sit and have a conversation with a colleague.”

The notion that where physicians and health professionals congregate to relax could make a dent in burnout is not unique to UCSF. A February 2016 report that grew out of the meeting of a group of consultants, physicians and other health professionals recommended that health care organizations “redesign the physical environment” to help “restore humanity” to health care. That can include break rooms, says the report.

“When doctors, nurses and staff gather in the same place for a cup of coffee, it increases the chances they will get to know one another on a personal level,” the report says. “When they share stories about their children or a planned vacation, it creates a personal bond that helps build their bond as a team.”

The CEOs of the AMA and 10 leading health care delivery organizations recently issued a call to action, urging health system leaders to take up 11 commitments aimed at restoring joy to medical practice. They include: systematically evaluating and tracking physician well-being; tracking the impact burnout has on medicine, such as turnover and early retirement; and looking for ways to reduce the burdens on physicians and other health care workers that are driving burnout.