

Physician well-being again a burning topic in 2017

DEC 20, 2017

Sara Berg, MS

Senior News Writer

Doctors' relationships with the communities they work in continue to change, but there is a constant need to find ways to improve physician well-being and restore joy in medicine. Throughout the year, some of our best-read stories examined burnout's impact, as well as what leading health systems and practices are doing to address physician well-being while aiming to improve patient care. Here are six top physician wellness and burnout stories covered by *AMA Wire®* in 2017.

Report reveals severity of burnout by specialty. Physicians from 27 specialties graded the severity of their burnout on a scale of one to seven in a recent Medscape survey—one being that it does not interfere, and seven indicating thoughts of leaving medicine. All but one specialty selected a four or higher. The most affected specialty? Emergency medicine, with nearly 60 percent of ED physicians saying they feel burned out, up from half in 2013. How can the rising prevalence and severity of burnout be addressed? Regulatory, systemic and practice environment issues appear to be key.

Once endangered, doctors' lounge revived to battle burnout. 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.

Wellness and work: 10 things to consider about going part time. Physicians have no trouble citing compelling reasons to reduce their work hours—stress, bureaucracy and the feeling of missing out on one's personal life, to name a few. But they can also face high hurdles to making the switch to a lighter workload, including medical school debt, career aspirations and pressure from employers. A health-care couple who made the break from full-time work shares 10 lessons they learned along the way.

Burnout's other dimension: Eroded sense of medicine as a calling. Burnout's effects on physicians are well documented, but new research puts a finer point on the issue. A core motivation for many physicians to practice medicine—a calling to help people—may be undermined by

professional burnout. Published in *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, the study looked at responses from more than 2,200 physicians to assess their identification with medicine as a calling, defined as committing one's life to work that is personally meaningful and serves a social purpose.

Burnout best addressed at the organizational level, research shows. Physicians experiencing burnout are often advised to meditate, get more exercise or adopt cognitive-behavioral strategies to address the problem. But recent research finds that interventions implemented at the organizational level are more effective than those directed at individuals. Yet those interventions are rare, pointing to the need for system-level changes to eliminate the causes of burnout.

Shadowing reveals more efficient ways to practice medicine. While many health care organizations are offering ways for physicians and other health professionals to cut stress through activities such as meditation or yoga, a health system in western Washington state has started a program that aims to find and address the root causes of physician frustrations with their days and nights in practice.

The AMA's STEPS Forward™ collection offers free online modules that help physicians and system leaders learn their risk factors for burnout and adopt medical practice solutions to reignite professional fulfillment and resilience, including modules that focus on professional well-being, such as preventing physician burnout and improving resiliency.

Several modules have been developed from the generous grant funding of the federal Transforming Clinical Practices Initiative (TCPI), an effort designed to help clinicians achieve large-scale health transformation through TCPI's Practice Transformation Networks. The AMA, in collaboration with TCPI, is providing technical assistance and peer-level support by way of STEPS Forward resources to enrolled practices. The AMA is also engaging the national physician community in health care transformation through network projects, change packages, success stories and training modules.