

What should be done about the physician burnout epidemic

There is a burnout epidemic that affects both physicians and patients.

With a majority of American physicians experiencing some sign of burnout, it is a condition that affects all specialties and all practice settings. Before we can improve doctors' well-being, a primer on the definition of physician burnout is in order.

Committed to making physician burnout a thing of the past, the AMA has studied, and is currently addressing, issues causing and fueling physician burnout—including time constraints, technology and regulations—to better understand the challenges physicians face.

The AMA Ed Hub™—your center for personalized learning from sources you trust—offers CME on professional well-being that can help you prevent physician burnout, create the organizational foundation for joy in medicine, create a strong team culture and improve physician resiliency.

Meanwhile, the AMA's STEPS Forward™ open-access platform offers innovative strategies that allow physicians and their staff to thrive in the new health care environment.

So what, precisely, is physician burnout?

Physician burnout is defined as a long-term stress reaction characterized by depersonalization. This can include:

- Cynical or negative attitudes toward patients.
- Emotional exhaustion.
- A feeling of decreased personal achievement.
- Lack of empathy for patients.

What causes physician burnout?

Burnout is often associated with increasing administrative responsibility due to regulatory pressures and evolving payment and care-delivery models. This can lead to a reduction in the amount of time physicians spend delivering direct patient care. When a physician is burned out, it can also have a significant impact on organizational productivity, morale, costs and the quality of care being delivered.

By measuring and responding to physician burnout, health care organizations can reduce sources of

stress and intervene with programs and policies that support professional well-being.

What can we do to address burnout?

Reducing burnout can have a positive impact on your practice or organization, including higher retention rates, improved devotion to patients, better morale in the office and improved recruitment. Research shows that most issues that cause burnout can be attributed to the environment in which physicians practice.

As an organization, prioritize and select interventions that address physician burnout where it exists. Focus on system-level changes, such as workflow redesign or better communication between physicians and other members of the health care team. Another intervention can be quality-improvement projects that are targeted to physician concerns. For example, you can present data from a physician burnout survey in an open forum to prompt discussion of issues within the practice or health care system.

AMA's STEPS Forward™ is an open-access platform featuring more than 50 modules that offer actionable, expert-driven strategies and insights supported by practical resources and tools. Based on best practices from the field, STEPS Forward modules empower practices to identify areas or opportunities for improvement, set meaningful and achievable goals, and implement transformative changes designed to increase operational efficiencies, elevate clinical team engagement, and improve patient care.

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.