

Physician burnout: Which specialties are least likely to ask for help

MAR 11, 2019

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Most health systems and medical practices are working to reduce physician burnout and improve well-being. However, many doctors remain reluctant to seek professional treatment for their symptoms of burnout or mental health conditions. Overall, about 40 percent of physicians are reluctant to seek formal medical care for treatment of a mental health condition.

In an online survey, 64 percent of physicians said they do not plan to and have not sought professional care in the past for symptoms of burnout. Only 13 percent of physicians expressed that they were currently seeking professional help for burnout and only 3 percent were planning to.

More than 15,000 physicians from 29 specialties responded to the survey—conducted by the Medscape news website and called the “National Physician Burnout, Depression & Suicide Report 2019.” Physicians were asked about the prevalence of burnout factors and how they affect doctors’ lives. The survey found an overall physician burnout rate of 44 percent.

Of physicians who said they have sought help or would seek help, 27 percent would see a psychiatrist or a therapist. Only 6 percent would participate in a physician health program, while 10 percent would confide in their peers or colleagues.

Among physicians who are burned out or depressed, the medical specialties most likely to seek help were:

- Psychiatry: 45 percent.
- Public health and preventive medicine: 45 percent.
- Obstetrics and gynecology: 37 percent.
- Pediatrics: 36 percent.
- Pathology: 34 percent.

The medical specialties who are the least likely to seek professional help for physician burnout were:

- | Urology: 20 percent.
- | Nephrology: 19 percent.
- | General surgery: 17 percent.
- | Rheumatology: 16 percent.
- | Allergy and immunology: 13 percent.

Why don't physicians seek help?

While many doctors are not publicly reaching out for help, several have in secret. The survey found that 7 percent of physicians admitted to receiving mental health care but kept it quiet. Twelve percent said they would consider reaching out for help in secret.

To keep this secret, some doctors drove an hour away from their home town and did not use insurance. Others even used a different name.

When physicians were asked why they have not gotten help, half said their symptoms were not severe enough. Nearly half (47 percent) stated that they could “deal with this without help from a professional,” while 39 percent of physicians were “too busy” and 20 percent did not want to risk disclosure.

Physicians encourage their patients to share concerns about depression, anxiety or other mental health conditions. However, doctors are less likely to seek help themselves due to stigma. This is often because physicians are concerned that having a history of mental illness could make it harder for them to obtain and retain licensure.

To improve physician access to mental health care, the AMA recently adopted policy to, “Encourage state licensing boards to require disclosure of physical or mental health conditions only when a physician is suffering from any condition that currently impairs his or her judgment or that would otherwise adversely affect his or her ability to practice medicine in a competent, ethical and professional manner, or when the physician presents a public health danger.”

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 and reduce the challenges physicians face. By focusing on factors causing burnout at the system-level, the AMA assesses an organization’s well-being and offers guidance and targeted solutions to support physician well-being and satisfaction.

The AMA Ed Hub™—your center for personalized learning from sources you trust—offers CME on a



broad range of topics including preventing physician burnout using the STEPS Forward™ open-access platform that offers innovative strategies that allow physicians and their staff to thrive in the new health care environment. These toolkits can help you prevent physician burnout, create the organizational foundation for joy in medicine, create a strong team culture and improve practice efficiency.