

How this year brought physician burnout into clearer focus

DEC 5, 2019

Sara Berg

Senior News Writer

Physician burnout leads the conversation in the medical community, and it is a major issue that continues to affect doctors and cost the U.S. health care system. As burnout continues to receive growing attention, health care organizations can shift their focus on well-being in the right direction.

This year, increased research and solutions have helped shine a light on physician burnout and well-being.

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.

From the most stressed medical specialties and factors signaling risk to new AMA honors for health care organizations, here is what we learned about physician burnout this year.

Most stressed medical specialties.

An online survey of doctors found an overall physician burnout rate of 44%, with 15% saying they experienced colloquial or clinical forms of depression. Two new entries in the top six specialties with the highest rates of burnout compared with last year's edition of the survey provided medical students and residents with new insight into their future careers.

Professional degrees compared.

Does whether you have a medical degree, doctor of philosophy (PhD) or juris doctor (JD) degree play a role in your risk for professional burnout? It does. Even though physicians and individuals with a JD or PhD complete a similarly lengthy training process, doctors remain at a higher risk for developing burnout.

10 work factors that hinder well-being.

Are you working too many hours, or taking work home with you? Answering yes to these questions—or several others related to your work environment or demographic profile—increases the odds that you are a burned out physician or have a greater chance of bearing that title.

Why women physicians are more likely to experience burnout.

Burnout is often associated with work-related stressors, but those too can vary in their impact on individual physicians, according to a National Academy of Medicine discussion paper. And while many causes affect both men and women, there are factors at play that more prominently affect female burnout in medicine.

4 personal factors signaling burnout risk.

Workplace pressures tend to dominate the discussion on physician burnout, but for many doctors there are substantial risk factors at play even before they pick up their stethoscopes to start another day of practice. Those factors are tied to gender, age and relationships.

These specialties are least likely to ask for help.

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% of physicians are reluctant to seek formal medical care for treatment of a mental health condition.

AMA honors 22 organizations' commitment to cutting doctor burnout.

Nearly two dozen health care organizations have earned recognition from the AMA for their outstanding efforts to address the systemic causes of physician burnout in areas such as assessment, leadership, teamwork and practice-environment efficiency.

New AMA effort to close solutions research gap.

The AMA has launched a three-year multimillion-dollar Practice Transformation Initiative to address the large gap in research on actionable solutions to mitigate burnout.

The AMA's STEPS Forward™ open-access modules offer innovative strategies that allow physicians and their staff to thrive in the new health care environment. These courses can help you prevent physician burnout, create the organizational foundation for joy in medicine and improve practice efficiency. One CME module specifically addresses how to create a strong team culture.

STEPS Forward is part of the AMA Ed Hub™, an online platform that consolidates all the high-quality CME, maintenance of certification, and educational content you need—in one place—with activities relevant to you, automated credit tracking and reporting for some states and specialty boards.