How Northwestern creates champions for physician well-being

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To reduce physician burnout, there needs to be a systems approach to professional well-being. But there are challenges to overcome, including the need for physician engagement and champions who can drive meaningful change. One way to create trained champions and accelerate culture change is through an award-winning program called the Scholars of Wellness.

The year-long Scholars of Wellness program at Northwestern Medicine in Chicago—created by psychiatrist Gaurava Agarwal, MD—provides training and resources to help address drivers of burnout within different department teams.

The first cohort of the year-long program included 10 physicians from 10 different specialties. In this group, 60% reported their own burnout had decreased. All scholars also felt more comfortable working with leadership and administration to complete tasks and promote change. And 70% felt more confident in recommending Northwestern Medicine to a colleague as a desirable place to work. The program is currently training its third cohort and has expanded the program to its regional hospitals. In total, nearly 40 physicians have been trained, representing over 20 departments and six hospitals.

“When you seed one of our scholars in these departments, what we see is the enthusiasm that they bring … really is contagious,” said Dr. Agarwal. “It can turn that tide so that others in the department really begin to sense this hope that something can be done.”

Here are three major areas Dr. Agarwal—director of physician well-being at Northwestern Medicine’s Medical Groups—focuses on with the Scholars of Wellness program to achieve optimal organizational functioning and maximum potential.

Leadership building
“There’s this idea of coaching in the health care ecosystem and what we’ve really done here is we’ve selected leaders and front-line physicians who we are effectively coaching,” said Dr. Agarwal. Each physician gets “two coaches and we’re coaching them on how they should think about wellness, change management and process improvement, but also how they can coach others in creating a well-being environment.”

Additionally, it is about “an approach to their own careers that highlights and takes into account, their individual wellness and their professional goals,” he added. “An important part of changing our culture is speaking with one voice on how we conceptualize wellness interventions as anything that allows physicians to achieve their calling of delivering high quality patient care.”

Read about 10 medical specialties and their 10 different ways to cut physician burnout.

**Local capacity and infrastructure**

When the scholars create their pilot programs for their individual departments, it’s about trying these initiatives at the “local level rather than me really rolling it out to the whole institution,” said Dr. Agarwal. For example, “peer support is one of our foundational well-being initiatives and we started it with two of our scholars in the anesthesia and ob-gyn departments,” he said.

“As we saw how that was helpful to those departments, I was then able to make the case to our institution that this is an occupational hazard that we need to address for everybody,” he said. Within a year, the effort was expanded to every doctor at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. The goal now is to scale the intervention across Northwestern’s hospital system.

**Learn to work together**

One goal, said Dr. Agarwal, was to help physicians work with their administrative business partners to achieve lasting changes.

“Each of our scholars has a performance-improvement coach who is designed to be someone who may be relevant to their project,” he said. “For instance, if someone wants to look at the EMR, their process-improvement coach may be someone from informatics.”

“When we are together working on a project, people really started investing,” said Dr. Agarwal. That is because “when we start to understand each other, we build trust.”

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