

Why health organizations should commit to fighting physician burnout

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The pandemic has placed tremendous strain on the resiliency and well-being of physicians and other health professionals across the country. Now more than ever, health systems and organizations must commit to fighting physician burnout.

The Massachusetts Medical Society and Massachusetts Health & Hospital Association have focused on addressing the underlying issues of physician burnout—and clinician burnout more generally—for more than three years. Their Joint Task Force on Physician Burnout recently collaborated with local and national organizations to commit to the issue. A total of 120 hospitals, physician organizations and health care leaders have signed on to affirm this commitment.

“In organizations, there are 100 different priorities and unless something becomes a priority of the leadership, it often doesn’t get the attention, the resources or the focus it deserves,” said Steven Defossez, MD, a radiologist and vice president of clinical integration at Massachusetts Health & Hospital Association. “For the people on the front lines, in the trenches, to know that their leaders hear them, acknowledge burnout is a crisis, publicly commit to measuring burnout and improving it, results in immediate relief and sustained improvement.

“And then of course when your organizations begin to learn and figure out what works and doesn’t work, and share that with each other, obviously there’ll be even more benefit to the front-line workers,” Dr. Defossez added.

In a recent discussion, Dr. Defossez shared three reasons why committing to address physician burnout is the pledge your organization should make now.

You care about the people

“From the leadership point of view—and probably from the public’s point of view too—is that you’re actually a humanitarian and you care about people and you care about their well-being,” said Dr. Defossez. “It turns out that when clinicians are burned out, they have lower rates of satisfaction on the job.

“They’re more likely to develop substance-use disorder, alcoholism, divorce, depression, anxiety, even suicidal ideation,” he added, noting that “if you care about people, that’s a reason to address burnout within your organization.”

You care about the patients

Organizations should commit to addressing burnout because they care about the patient, said Dr. Defossez. That is because “burned out clinicians are not received as well by patients” as those who are not burned out.

“The patient experience of seeing someone who’s emotionally exhausted, depressed and down is not the same as seeing somebody who is perky, excited and there for you,” he added. “And it turns out when the patient experience is worse, the patients are less likely to follow the physician or clinician’s orders and then their actual outcomes become worse.”

That means that “if you care about patient quality and safety, then you should care about burnout,” Dr. Defossez said.

You care about the organization

As a leader of an organization, “you care about the actual organization’s financial well-being,” said Dr. Defossez, adding that “clinician burnout drives increased expenses and decreased revenue for the organization.

When physicians and other health professionals are burned out, they “are more likely to make mistakes and be involved in issues that drive up cost for no additional benefit,” he said. “For example, these individuals may be more likely to order unnecessary laboratory tests or consultations.”

“Teamwork and morale—as you can imagine—are also decreased when you’re working with someone who is under that kind of stress,” Dr. Defossez said, noting that burnout often causes physicians to “either cut back their hours or leave the organization altogether.

“And in health care, it’s very expensive to replace a clinician,” he added. “It could be as much as three times that person’s annual salary when you factor in all the costs required in replacing a clinician, which isn’t just recruitment, but also the cost of building up a practice, the secondary costs of what happens to everyone else in the clinic and lost revenue.

“When everyone in the workforce is directionally aligned, committed and trying to do what the organization’s trying to do, then the organization can really succeed,” Dr. Defossez noted.

Read about how much physician burnout is costing your organization.

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.