Surgeon general: We must act together to address physician burnout

NOV 19, 2021

Sara Berg, MS
Senior News Writer

Physicians and other health professionals on the front lines of COVID-19 care have experienced so many unknowns during the pandemic. They’ve also put their own health and the well-being of their families on the line to provide care. Fortunately, though, the country is in a better position than it was a year ago. Despite the rise of the Delta variant and increases in cases and hospitalizations, the three available COVID-19 vaccines have helped save lives. But the fight isn’t over yet. Another battle remains: burnout within the exhausted physician workforce.

“It’s felt hopeful to me, especially in the early parts of the pandemic, to see many people in the public recognizing the role that clinicians were playing and the sacrifices they were making,” said U.S. Surgeon General Vice Adm. Vivek Murthy, MD, during a discussion with AMA CEO and Executive Vice President James L. Madara, MD, at the American Conference on Physician Health 2021.

But “I also worry about what’s happened to our clinicians. Yes, they have been absolute heroes, but that’s coming at a cost,” said Dr. Murthy. “The question that we have to ask ourselves as a country is: Are we willing to finally step up and do something?

“This is a time where we have an opportunity, but also an obligation, to address some of these deeper challenges of clinician well-being,” he added.

Here are ways the government can help reduce physician burnout and improve well-being.

Work together to address burnout

“We know that in order to address burnout, this isn’t about one organization or one sector—we all have to act together,” said Dr. Murthy. The “government has got to play an important role here. Health
care systems have an important role to play.”

Also, “we know educational institutions, training institutions have an important role they can play,” he said, adding there’s even “an important role for policymakers and the public.”

The federal government has a unique opportunity and power “that is critical to highlight the issue for the general public and to lay out a national strategy around” physician burnout and well-being, said Dr. Murthy.

Discover how the crucible of COVID-19 can help fix the health care system.

Don’t focus solely on the individual

“The bottom line with all of this, though, is … you can’t assume that solely focusing on equipping individual physicians with individual tools is going to be the solution to burnout,” said Dr. Murthy. “This is not just about enrolling physicians in a CME around self-care that they take for three days. … The problem is it is so much more systemic, and it’s deeper than that.”

Bringing “the right people together—the right sectors together—to commit to … both the systemic and process changes, but also the cultural changes that need to take place in an institution is going to be extraordinarily difficult,” he said.

Read about why burnout isn’t due to resiliency deficit, but a system issue.

Educate the public about burnout

“All of this cannot happen sustainably without us bringing the public in. And I don’t mean the broader health care professional,” Dr. Murthy said. “I mean the general public outside of health care because I don’t think that the general public fully appreciates how the problem of physician burnout is already impacting the care that you’re getting or not.

“We know that when clinicians drop out of the workforce, it’s not just that there are fewer people that care for COVID patients at hospitals, but our ability to provide primary care, hospital-based care and other clinicians across the board also is compromised,” he said. “There’s so much more we need to do to help the public understand why clinician well-being is not just an issue for clinicians.

“It is a national priority, and it has to be treated with the urgency that it really deserves,” Dr. Murthy
The AMA offers resources to help physicians manage their own mental health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic and provides practical strategies for health system leadership to consider in support of their physicians and care teams during COVID-19.