A boost for doctors’ well-being? Bring back the physician lounge

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Enloe Medical Center in Chico, California, had a physician lounge.

It was 550 square feet.

In the basement.

Dark.

It lost the library space it once had and it was cramped, with about 15 chairs and offered mediocre food.

It wasn’t a place physicians wanted to come to connect with one another—and it wasn’t going to reduce anyone’s stress.

With thought and effort, medical center leaders transformed the space and the people who gathered in it.

During an episode of “AMA Moving Medicine,” Marcia Nelson, MD, Enloe Medical Center’s chief medical officer, talked about how they went about restoring their physician lounge and the positive impact that’s had on the organization’s culture after physicians had a dynamic space to socialize with peers or find a quiet spot to take a moment for themselves.

“As I saw the original physician lounge contract … I saw the toll that took on physicians' relationships. People didn't talk the same way. They didn't relate the same way. They didn't share those small bits of their lives with their colleagues that really drives satisfaction in the workplace,” Dr. Nelson said.
“When we were thinking about a newer site—really the biggest reason in the design—was to have a place where physicians could connect,” Dr. Nelson said. “A place that would drive better medical care because the physicians would be working with colleagues again.”

The transformation began when the hospital made a change in its food service provider. The company ultimately selected makes putting a chef in the doctor’s lounge part of their business model.

“And that really triggered all the different possibilities. We had already been thinking about expanding the physician lounge space but that really was the icing on a cake,” Dr. Nelson said.

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.

An inviting space for all

The new space has a lively eating area. It’s also a spot where they display a rotating physician art exhibit. There are TVs muted in the background and operating room schedules.

Through a door, there is a smaller room with couches, recliners and computer stations. It also includes a more private room where physicians can work on peer review charts.

“People come in and just do quiet work. There are stacks of JAMA, New England Journal in there for them to look at. I see people just checking their phones, just chilling, sitting back in the recliners, talking in small groups,” Dr. Nelson said.

Pre-COVID, there were popup noon lectures. When COVID-19 hit, they took out about half the seating but the lounge became a place where they could hold oral presentations at noon about what was going on with the virus.

Keeping the doctors’ lounge open was a priority once the pandemic hit.

“It became the hub for sharing information and ... defusing the fear of what was going on,” Dr. Nelson said. “If I knew something, my doctors were going to know it.”

Studies have shown the important role the sense of community plays in boosting professional satisfaction among physicians. Enloe Medical Center leaders saw that in real time.
The hospital has measured engagement and burnout for years. In 2017, the medical staff’s overall burnout rate was 48%. In 2020, burnout was reduced to 37%.

“AMA Moving Medicine” highlights innovation and the emerging issues that impact physicians and public health today. You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version, which also features educational presentations and in-depth discussions.