

# How private practices can adapt amid burnout, staff shortages

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Burnout and staff shortages persist, but the AMA is helping with tips and tools that help physicians keep their practices open and succeeding, according to Carol Vargo, the AMA's director of physician practice sustainability.

Vargo discussed the history and the present state of practice sustainability during an episode of "AMA COVID-19 Update."

The onset of the pandemic hit some physicians harder than others depending on their practice setting, Vargo said.

"Private practice physicians in particular really felt more of the brunt of the uncertainty, the immediacy, the unknown at the time," she said. "The challenges that they faced at that time were crisis-mode."

"What we are now seeing is continued struggles, but different," she said. Among the largest challenges right now is burnout, which was already at high levels for physicians prior to the pandemic.

"We are now in a situation where, for two years, physicians have worked tirelessly and not just physicians but their care teams, their administrative staff—dealing with these uncertainties and unknowns, and then dealing with a rush of patients coming in who are probably more severely ill than they were before," she said.

## Dealing with staffing shortages

Staffing shortages are also at a crisis level. Employees are emerging from the pandemic with a desire to seek other opportunities and leave the high-pressure world of health care.

The AMA offers support for private practices that are particularly struggling in this environment, she said. First, the association has updated its physician practice guide to keeping your practice open. The guide includes strategies and tips to recruit and retain staff through more flexible scheduling, such as implementing work from home for staff, and eliminating wasted time and building more proficient office procedures.

The guide also supplies updated protocols on masking as well as scheduling patients and vaccinations that need to be communicated to staff and patients. The guide supplies guidance for managing communication between employees and patients, including scripts that can standardize policies and procedures, which are critical, Vargo said.

“Be very clear. You can post your office procedures. We also encourage staff, when calling ahead or scheduling patients, to articulate those requirements very clearly, and again, our script that we provide allows them to do that. ... Just put it in front of your admin staff so that there's no failure of clear communication.”

Download “A physician guide to keeping your practice open during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic” (PDF).

It takes astute clinical judgment as well as a commitment to collaboration and solving challenging problems to succeed in independent settings that are often fluid, and the AMA offers the resources and support physicians need to both start and sustain success in private practice.

Find out more about the AMA Private Practice Physicians Section, which seeks to preserve the freedom, independence and integrity of private practice.

## **Schedule practice “huddles”**

Vargo also recommended that private practices have regular staff “huddles” to share ideas and review the practice activities.

The idea could seem “counterintuitive” for time-squeezed physician practices, she acknowledged.

“But taking an extra 30 minutes or maybe even an hour on a weekly basis to step back and really think through some of the strategies ... could save you a lot more time in the long run,” Vargo said.



“Those 30 minutes could add up and save you hours each week. It also, I think, can lead to better morale around your care team,” she added.

Get the latest news on the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccines and variants, and more reliable information directly from experts and physician leaders with the “AMA COVID-19 Update.”

You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version.