What really drives doctor burnout and how to fix it

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Statistics about physician burnout continue to raise concern throughout the health care system as 63% of physicians reported experiencing at least one form of burnout during the peak of the Omicron wave in the winter of 2021–2022.

COVID-19 made the public more aware of doctor burnout, but the problems facing the physician workforce existed long before the pandemic began. Because of that, it will take more than an end to the pandemic to improve conditions for physicians, according to Paul DeChant, MD, co-author of Preventing Physician Burnout: Curing the Chaos and Returning Joy to the Practice of Medicine.

Dr. DeChant explained some of the factors that led to the rise of burnout in physicians, and more importantly the steps that need to be taken to combat it, in a recent episode of “AMA Update.” He will be keynote speaker at the AMA co-sponsored 2022 International Conference on Physician Health. Register now.

Six drivers of burnout

There are six factors identified by pioneering researcher Christina Maslach, PhD, that influence burnout. They are:

- Work overload.
- Lack of control.
- Insufficient rewards.
- Breakdown of community.
- Sense of unfairness.

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Conflicting values.

Dr. DeChant acknowledged those factors are common across industries, but that the pandemic has made them intensely felt among physicians. More than ever, physicians want to connect with their patients, relieve suffering and save lives, educate future physicians, or work on innovative research. Unfortunately, most of their time is spent not doing those things, he said.

"The way that work is designed now, we only spend about a third of our time doing that meaningful work," Dr. DeChant said. "Two-thirds of our time gets wrapped up in administrivia, like typing data into the EMR or sitting on the phone waiting to get a prior auth from an insurance clerk for care we know our patient needs."

Reducing physician burnout is a critical component of the AMA Recovery Plan for America's Physicians.

Far too many American physicians experience burnout. That's why the AMA develops resources that prioritize well-being and highlight workflow changes so physicians can focus on what matters—patient care.

How to reduce physician burnout

The first thing to understand is there is not a one-size-fits-all solution.

"Burnout is common in every health system and the drivers of burnout are very common as well," Dr. DeChant said. "But every health system is unique, and so there [are] different systems where they need more advanced and actually redesigned workflows to help physicians spend more time focused on meaningful work."

Conducting surveys (PDF), understanding key metrics related to safety, knowing how the health system is performing financially, and recognizing what the patient experience looks like can all be valuable data points for leaders looking to understand what their health system needs. More importantly, Dr. DeChant recommended leaders see for themselves what their physicians' pain points are to best understand the challenges the system faces.

"Go and shadow physicians," he said. "Follow them while they're doing their work to witness and see that actual challenge. The other option is to sit down and talk to the people that are on the front lines. Interview them about their challenges. Developing that deeper understanding of the actual human impact on what's happening in the real world makes it far easier than to take diagnostic data, interpret it and apply it to coming up with a solution."
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