What this physician leader has learned about the power of “No”

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A small, square sheet of paper with nine inspirational words sticks to the desktop of Betty Chu, MD: "If I can't say no, my yes means nothing."

Dr. Chu, associate chief clinical officer and chief quality officer at Henry Ford Health, first said those words years ago, but she continues to use them as a reminder to this day. If she overcommits herself, everything she does will suffer.

"If I say yes to everything, I'm certainly not going to be good at all of those things," she said. "And then that's going to diminish my effectiveness. It's going to diminish my ability to be successful not only for myself, but for the people that I'm serving."

Dr. Chu, who also is a member of the AMA Council on Medical Service, explained that mentality and how she tries to create work-life balance in a recent episode of “AMA Update.”

Bringing innovation to your life

In a commencement address she gave last year, Dr. Chu advised that the graduating college students should innovate in their own lives. To do that, she said, it's imperative to first identify their purpose.

In Dr. Chu's case, she determined that her own purpose is to use her skills to serve the most people possible. What she and other physicians and health professionals have discovered during the COVID-19 pandemic is that it's not healthy to focus exclusively on that purpose.

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At Henry Ford Health and across the country, she said, health professionals started coming to terms with the essential need to more firmly separate their work and home lives in order to be effective at either. Henry Ford Health is a member of the AMA Health System?Program, which provides enterprise solutions to equip leadership, physicians and care teams with resources to help drive the future of medicine.

Dr. Chu said that for physicians and other health professionals, there need to be boundaries—and that's where innovation comes in.

"We often design and create change," she said, "but innovating is actually applying that change to the ways that we work every day—and the ways we behave every day—so that we can create a different reality for the way that we show up and that we're present."

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.

**Enabling positive change**

The pandemic forced Dr. Chu to consider what changes she could bring to her life, and one she focused on was her daily commute. The drive from her home to Henry Ford Health takes more than 30 minutes each way. She wondered if there was a hybrid model to implement that would allow her to occasionally work from home and use the extra hour that she gained for herself.

"Can I utilize that hour in a way that contributes to my overall wellness?" she asked herself.

In response, she began finding new activities to do that took her mind off of work. She picked up squash —though she admits she's terrible. Winning isn't the goal, though, at least for her.

"Part of innovation is challenging myself to continually try to do new things so that I can continue to grow in my own life," she said. Doing so enables Dr. Chu to “show up every day in a positive way—in a way that positively impacts people with my leadership” and use “my skills to serve a large population, a large community of people, and affect the most amount of change."

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