

“Try harder” isn’t the fix for physician burnout. Learn what is.

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The prevalence of physician burnout during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic was 38.2%, the lowest ever recorded. By the end of 2021, that percentage ballooned to 62.8%, the highest since the AMA first partnered with Stanford Medicine and the Mayo Clinic to track burnout among physicians in 2011.

As the burnout rate among physicians escalated, career satisfaction among physicians in 2021 plummeted to 30%, according to a study published in *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*.

"Two out of every three physicians is experiencing some sign of burnout. Only one in three physicians feels professionally satisfied," said Christine Sinsky, MD, the AMA's vice president of professional satisfaction.

The work that physicians do is so “inherently meaningful” that if two-thirds of doctors aren’t feeling fulfilled by it, Dr. Sinsky said, then “you have to know that something is going wrong in that external environment in which we're working.”

Dr. Sinsky co-wrote the study on changes in burnout and talked about the implications of its findings in a recent episode of “AMA Update.”

Politicized care

This study was the fifth survey conducted by the AMA, Stanford Medicine and the Mayo Clinic. The previous four were distributed every three years and found high rates of burnout due to administrative burdens.

The last survey included feedback from November 2020 through March 2021—the tail end of the first year of the pandemic. Because of that unique timing, Dr. Sinsky and her colleagues wanted to conduct an additional survey to see how attitudes were changing as the pandemic wore on.

"This spike in burnout rates in the second year of the pandemic has to be a mix of both old issues and new factors," Dr. Sinsky said.

That may in part be due to "the introduction of politics into medical care," she added. Such politicization has likely "been a big strain for physicians."

"In the first year, physicians were the heroes. People were banging pots for them at shift change. Now, physicians are engaged often in really difficult conversations with patients who may not believe in the science of COVID, who don't believe in the treatments that are offered or that aren't offered."

Medical care becoming yet another political football has likely "added a new dimension of stress," Dr. Sinsky added.

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.

Focus on environment of care

Dr. Sinsky cautioned against thinking that because only one-third of physicians feel professionally satisfied that there must be something wrong with the other two-thirds. While burnout manifests in individuals, she said, it originates in systems.

"We need to fix the workplace rather than focusing on fixing the worker," Dr. Sinsky said. "The worker isn't broken. It's really the environment that's been broken."

"If we start our work on burnout by saying to individuals, 'You just have to try harder,' I think we've started off on the wrong foot, and we're just not going to be successful. We have this opportunity to look at the environments where physicians and their teams work and find ways to unleash that latent professionalism, to find ways to increase the opportunities for people to live up to their aspirations."

To increase those opportunities, a lot of administrative burdens physicians deal with need to be addressed. Reducing the number of clicks in an EHR can save a lot of time, improve efficiencies, and ultimately help physicians feel more satisfied at work. Similarly, fixing prior authorization can make a big difference.

"Our overall goal is to help improve the conditions where joy, purpose and meaningful work are possible for physicians and their teams," Dr. Sinsky said.

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