

Atrius Health Promotes Joy in Medicine through Local and Global Improvements

Spotlight: Atrius Health and The Joy in Medicine™ Health System Recognition Program

How does one make sweeping changes to address a program when there is no one-size-fits-all solution? That was the challenge at Atrius Health, a large outpatient, multi-practice group with over 5,000 employees located in Eastern Massachusetts. Karim Awad, MD, a sleep medicine physician and medical director of clinician wellness, was determined to reduce physician burnout at Atrius Health, but quickly realized that there is no “easy fix” to reducing burnout.

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“It is not just one thing that causes burnout... We really learned that it was multifaceted. But we didn’t know how much of a problem it was.”

– KARIM AWAD, MD

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In 2016, when Steven Strongwater, MD, became the chief executive officer and president at Atrius Health, he and Joe Kimura, MD, chief medical officer, wanted to foster more joy in medicine within Atrius Health so that all physicians would feel like they had meaningful, fulfilling careers. They envisioned the creation of a department focused on improving professional fulfillment and set out to build the business case for a long-term investment and commitment for the organization.

The business case for investing in physician well-being is becoming more evident but it wasn’t always obvious to organizations just beginning this work. Dr. Awad knew that building a business case would be key to building and maintaining leadership support and ensuring resources for a long-term organizational commitment. Equipped with evidence on how physicians’ quality of life would improve and the tangible financial benefits of investing in physician well-being (less turnover, high quality patient care, etc.), the department of clinical affairs was born.

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“If you do not have the C-suite as an ally, it’s going to be very difficult to run a program - for funding, but also for being able to vouch for you... They become champions.”

– KARIM AWAD, MD

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The AMA Joy in Medicine Health System Recognition program served as a model for the design and strategy development of the department of clinical affairs. According to Dr. Awad, “The nice thing about the

program is that it creates a national standard. And we know it is evidence-based. That was the concept behind creating a proposal and a plan."

Once the department was founded, Dr. Awad and Anne Dixon, MD, senior medical director of clinical affairs, began to investigate burnout and professional fulfillment within departments across Atrius Health. Dr. Awad visited departments personally and engaged with staff. Importantly, he also implemented an annual assessment to capture common challenges and desired changes and improvements to reduce staff burnout and support professional fulfillment. Atrius Health has since conducted a validated burnout assessment each year for the last five years.

Through these assessments, Dr. Awad discovered that a range of challenges impacted burnout, including difficulties with the MyHealth management program, proper patient triage, prescription refill procedures, and communication among staff. In response to these identified challenges, Dr. Awad invited each department or unit to vote for which challenges should be prioritized. This active participation from departments not only empowered physicians to support problem-solving but also helped the organization identify high-yield opportunities first and gain credibility among the departments. Work groups were then established to address prioritized issues head-on, and department leaders provided protected time to do so.

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"What affects you might not affect somebody else... Each unit has a specific reason or specific issue that needs to be tackled. This is what's important when it comes to burnout. There are certainly things globally that can help. But then there are very specific and focused details that are relevant to you and you only."

– KARIM AWAD, MD

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In one office, medical assistants and physicians had challenges working together. Medical assistants (MAs) were assisting different physicians, each of whom had their own working style. It was difficult for MAs to shift back and forth between different physicians throughout the day, leading to frustration and a lot

of time spent adjusting to new workflows. The team decided to assign dedicated MAs to physicians so that clear workflows could be established and followed. As a result of this relatively simple intervention, burnout levels decreased 20-30% within that office.

The internal medicine group began piloting a process to establish highly focused and functioning care teams. According to Dr. Awad, *"Each member of the team is tackling certain things that need to be done for the patient and is working within their level of license, meaning that the clinician is not doing administrative work that somebody else could do. Creating this idea that everyone helps with the patient and we're all part of a team - it's not all just on the clinicians. All of us together are helping the patient."*

Atrius Health has also developed and launched organization-wide programs, such as a coaching program for all clinical leaders. This six-month program engages physicians with learning activities focused on participatory management to ensure that leaders can actively engage and activate their teams when finding solutions to problems. All clinical leaders (from chiefs to chairs, excluding members of the C-suite) have protected time to participate in didactic sessions as they are scheduled during already assigned chief meetings. The one-hour coaching session per month falls under administrative time. As a result of this program, one pediatric unit found improved fulfillment and reduced burnout for not only the chief officers, but also their direct reports. A leadership index is also used to measure physician leadership capacity and skills, which has made visible and purposeful leadership integral to Atrius Health's culture.

Atrius Health continues to dig into local and global challenges across their system, looking to the AMA as the national standard. Dr. Awad shares, *"It's really about improving our practice so it's one of the best places to work... And that's a goal that really has no end, meaning that we're always striving and moving toward that goal."*



KARIM AWAD, MD