Recognizing and Reducing Physician Burnout, a Holistic Approach
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Physician burnout is real, and it is on the rise. According to Medscape’s Lifestyle Report 2017: Race and Ethnicity, Bias and Burnout, in a survey of over 14,000 physicians from 30 specialties, the overall burnout rate is now at 51 percent, an increase from 40 percent in 2013.¹ The survey also found, “the highest percentages of burnout occurred among physicians practicing emergency medicine (59%), followed by ob/gyns (56%) and family physicians, internists, and infectious disease physicians (all at 55%).”²

Researchers who study burnout describe it as a long-term reaction to stress that is characterized by emotional exhaustion, a detachment or decline in feelings related to services or care provided to others (depersonalization), and a decreased sense of personal fulfillment or accomplishment.³ The greatest sources of stress identified by physicians experiencing burnout include the magnitude of administrative tasks required to meet regulatory and payor requirements, heavy workloads and long hours, adapting to rapid changes in technology such as the implementation of electronic medical records, and the loss of control over their practice and how they provide care to their patients.⁴ Individual characteristics common to most physicians can also be risk factors for experiencing stress and burnout. By nature, physicians are caregivers who put others first, and they tend to be perfectionists, hard workers, and problem solvers.⁵,⁶ By training, they are required to work long hours in a fast-paced, competitive, and emotionally charged healthcare environment with little or no training in self-care or stress management.

Long periods of stress leading to burnout can have significant negative consequences for physicians, for their practices and organizations, and for patients. Physicians may become less engaged in their work and some may choose to leave the profession altogether or retire early, which can result in access issues for patients. Some physicians may even succumb to depression or substance abuse. Additionally, high levels of stress and burnout can lead to an increased incidence of medical errors. This correlation can work both ways, as medical errors can also be the cause of significantly high levels of rapid onset stress and burnout.⁷

Often, steps taken to address physician burnout focus on the individual physician only. Most states have physician wellness programs which provide counseling and rehabilitation programs for physicians struggling with substance abuse, mental health, and stress-related issues.

Some organizations are taking a new and expanded approach by developing systematic and multidimensional programs focused on prevention, early identification, and mitigation of the personal, professional, and environmental sources of stress that lead to physician burnout. The goal of these programs is to improve efficiencies in work flows and processes in order to improve physician satisfaction and decrease the sources of stress in day-to-day work.⁸,⁹ One example is the American Medical Association’s STEPS Forward™ program, which provides physicians with various education modules grouped by several categories, including Patient Care, Workflow and Process, Leading Change, Professional Well-Being, and Technology and Finance.¹⁰ Physicians are encouraged to implement

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strategies from these learning modules into their practice to improve the overall patient experience, optimize population health, and reduce costs, all while also improving physician satisfaction and well-being.\textsuperscript{11}

Advocates of systematic approaches to conquering physician burnout include Dr. Tejal Ghandi, CEO of the National Patient Safety Foundation, who has stated, “There’s a lot of focus on building individual resilience. We think there needs to be a focus on systems as well.”\textsuperscript{12}

Those interested in designing programs that take a proactive and holistic approach to recognizing and reducing the stressors contributing to physician burnout may wish to consider including the following elements:

- Incorporate measures of physician satisfaction, well-being, and outcomes in the organization’s quality improvement program. This acknowledges and prioritizes the importance of physician well-being, enhances early identification of stressors, and can prevent burnout through the use of timely mitigation strategies.
- Examine and streamline daily workflows to promote efficiencies in both administrative and clinical tasks. One study of 23 high-functioning primary care practices demonstrated how assigning clinical support staff members to physicians and delegating appropriate tasks improved teamwork, communication, productivity, and overall job satisfaction.\textsuperscript{13}
- Recognize and address the stress associated with electronic documentation. Consider using scribes, adjusting visit times, and/or adding scheduled times throughout the day to allow for entering and reviewing patient data.
- Promote work/life balance by considering practice models which provide physicians with more control over work schedules and adequate coverage/staffing ratios to meet not only patient care needs, but also predictable life events, such as personal vacations and maternity/family leaves.
- Identify what is important to each physician for professional growth and provide time and opportunities for ongoing education and career development.
- Prioritize physician wellness and provide open and available support and resources for self-care.\textsuperscript{14}

Burnout of physicians has been studied for many years, yet it remains a constant threat to job satisfaction and overall well-being. It can also affect the quality of care provided to patients and can negatively impact healthcare organizations and the communities they serve. Since burnout is a complex issue influenced by multiple factors, a holistic approach to preventing and managing physician burnout can not only improve efficiencies in the delivery of healthcare, but can also restore physician work/life balance and preserve the joy that comes from providing the best and safest care to every patient.\textsuperscript{15}

We hope you found this RisKey helpful. If you have questions or would like further resources on this topic, please contact your Coverys Risk Management Consultant.

References

2. Ibid.
4. Peckham C.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Whitman E.
15. American Medical Association (AMA).

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