

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Burnout Suffered by 42% of Physicians”

A recent Medscape survey found that 42% of physicians report burnout. Physicians face “assembly-line medicine pressures,” merciless scheduling demands, battles with insurance companies, increasing regulations, and an explosion in scientific literature with which their knowledge must remain current. Their debt burdens often total hundreds of thousands of dollars, and they struggle in constant fear of malpractice suits. In medical school, professors teach their driven young students to put their own emotions aside, even as they attend to tragedy. A Mayo Clinic study showed an association between burnout and declining professional satisfaction with physicians reducing the number of hours they devote to clinical practice. Tragically, an even greater problem is the high rate of suicides amongst physicians and at least 400 doctors kill themselves annually, as of 2015. The current body of knowledge suggests burnout is driven by external factors, such as inefficient work processes, long work hours, heavy workloads, work-home conflicts, and organizational culture considerations. In 2018, 1,528 physicians at the Cleveland Clinic Health System were surveyed with the medical personnel version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory. Of the 1,145 respondents (mean age, 50), 399 (35%) had scores indicating overall burnout. About 38% of the respondents were in internal or family medicine, with the rest spread among 11 specialties. Non-white physicians were less likely than white physicians to meet criteria for overall burnout. Also, overall burnout was more common among physicians with full-time-equivalent status, as was emotional exhaustion. Male physicians, on average, scored higher than female physicians on depersonalization. The 35% burnout rate among respondents was “pretty similar to other institutions measured at or around the same time frame, if not a bit lower,” first author Dr. Amy K. Windover of the Cleveland Clinic told Reuters Health, “While the prevalence was equivalent to or even lower than other institutions, it signals the need for systemic change in the health-care industry.” Dr. Colin P. West, of Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, told Reuters Health by email that these results “generally align with what we have learned from previous studies of physician burnout, including the impact of burnout on turnover.” If the most-dedicated physicians are at greatest risk of burnout, he noted, physicians may paradoxically have to limit the time they spend “being a doctor” day-to-day to maintain their endurance for the longer term. Overall, physicians spend an average of only 27% of their day on direct “face time” with patients—and 49% on clerical work.

In the America that I love, ideally, we hope physicians can find true happiness improving their patient’s health and helping patients improve their overall lives. I truly believe that physicians take their oath seriously, even in a world that occasionally appears to be going crazy.

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