Ending Physician Burnout Requires Systemic Change

By Tiffany Hackett, MD, MBA

Physician burnout has reached an all-time high, and emergency physicians appear to be among the hardest hit. Surveys reported by Medscape and Annals of Internal Medicine suggest that more than 60 percent of attending emergency physicians and 76 percent of residents experience burnout symptoms like depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and a low sense of personal accomplishment.

These stats resonate with many of my EM colleagues and me. The push to improve our metrics, such as time-to-provider and turnaround-time-to-discharge, and to increase productivity is nonstop. We are increasingly doing more with less—is anyone else setting up suture trays, removing dirty sheets from beds, and hunting down supplies?—all while being asked—indeed, incentivized—to maintain a high level of patient satisfaction. These pulls are pressures that distract us from what we trained to do and are downright draining.

Embracing programs that promote wellness and resilience is a positive first step in solving this complex issue, one that has saved lives and careers. Historically, too many physicians have struggled alone with work-related stress and trauma. Resilience programs acknowledge and can normalize these experiences while emphasizing our strengths.

Promoting physician resilience is helpful, but it's not enough. It's also crucial to address the systemic issues behind burnout to maintain a vibrant, engaged, and motivated physician workforce.

Organizational culture is a critical area that must be addressed to impart sustainable change to the well-being of emergency physicians and advanced practice providers.

We have started an organizational initiative called Joy in Medicine that supports individuals while working toward systemic change. The focus is on developing a culture of wellness, engagement, and empathy. The initiative also promotes practice efficiencies and offers education and resources to help providers improve their resiliency and wellness.

Comprised of providers and business professionals, the Joy in Medicine team recommends tools and best practices that help empower local practices to remove barriers that get in the way of excellence for the patient, family, and provider experience. Some of the outcomes have included promoting flexible scheduling at the practice-site level, educating organizational leaders about how to foster personal wellness, and emphasizing core values such as the ability to speak freely about issues that affect provider engagement.

While physicians and advanced practice providers can't effect systemic change alone, we are an essential part of any solution. By focusing on holistic solutions that marry personal wellness with systemic change, we can end burnout and build a healthier, more engaged physician workforce.
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