Preventing Physician Burnout

Forest fires are often left to burn themselves out. Confined to a restricted area, the fire's available fuel dwindles, the flames wear down and what may once have been a raging inferno is eventually extinguished with a whimper. All too often a similar drama plays out internally for health care professionals. Aptly called “burnout,” this increasingly common condition, if not actively prevented, can be debilitating for physicians and devastating for their patients.

Burnout is a form of mental or physical breakout common in human service occupations, including professionals in healthcare — especially those involved in providing primary care. Long hours, prolonged stress and professional frustration wear down the individual’s internal reserves, until they ultimately disengage. Like a fire struggling to burn despite depleted resources, once enthusiastic professionals may slowly become characterized by depersonalization, low achievement and emotional exhaustion.

Given the rapidly changing healthcare landscape and ever-increasing workloads associated with being a medical professional, it’s unsurprising that burnout rates are experiencing a steady rise. Recent studies suggest that around 45 percent of practicing physicians display symptoms of burnout, while levels for residents spike as high as 76 percent.

According to Medscape’s 2015 Family Physician Lifestyle report, many factors contribute to this condition. While work-life balance and lack of sleep are perennially problematic, the most often reported complaints reflect frustration with an increasingly bureaucratic system. Doctors often have limited time with patients and are overwhelmed with insurance company paperwork, government regulations and efforts to computerize record-keeping. These conditions are further compounded by the need to stay up to date by constantly reading journal articles, pursuing continuing medical education (CME) and visiting medical web pages.

Dr. Jamie Huysman, VP of Government and Provider Relations for WellMed Medical Group, explains that “spending long hours in focusing exclusively on the well-being of others has led to high rates of stress, substance abuse, depression and even suicide among our ranks. So it's not difficult to imagine the effects these hours, compounded daily, may ultimately have on the quality of care we are able to provide to our patients.”

Because physician burnout is associated with poorer patient outcomes due to impacts on staff turnover and frequency of medical errors, finding ways to combat burnout at the institutional level is imperative. The first step is to establish physician wellness as a priority. Creating a wellness committee...
can provide a forum to address specific factors contributing to burnout and to brainstorm on how to address them. Team member surveys can also be used to identify the level of burnout present and to hone in on possible causes.

Based on this feedback, targeted interventions can be applied to help re-energize physicians. Modest changes to workflow may be able to streamline certain tasks, while increased communication may bring meaning to seemingly superfluous processes. Shifting schedules and adjusting how responsibilities are distributed between physician and non-physician staff may also be helpful.

Many institutions are also beginning to incorporate less conventional ways to increase physician satisfaction. Whether it’s designating a meditation room for physicians to unwind in or bringing in massage therapists, anything that underscores the importance of physician wellness is a step toward reducing burnout.

Efforts on the institutional level can have a broad impact on physician well-being, but individuals can also take steps to reduce their personal risk. Although slightly counterintuitive, taking time on a daily basis to focus on things other than work can actually help most physicians improve their ability to engage on the job and even lengthen their life expectancy. Activities such as meditation, hobbies and social interactions outside the office all provide much-needed balance. Vacations are likewise an important outlet for releasing built-up pressures.

Finally, effective communication is another important component of the physician self-care toolkit. Reaching out to other physicians to understand how they handle stress or to express concern about conditions that are contributing to workplace dissatisfaction can help reduce isolation and provide helpful perspective before burnout becomes critical.

Physicians represent the single most valuable asset at any medical facility. And as burnout levels continue to rise, the importance of preventing stress-related breakdowns is increasingly apparent. Conversely, as institutions and individuals place a priority on physician well-being, even minor changes have the potential to improve conditions for both physicians and patients. Dr. Jamie Huysman, agrees, “when we exclude ourselves from our circle of care, burnout, empathy fatigue and emotional decline with ourselves, families and our patients can be the unintentional result.” When healthcare systems and healthcare employers take the time to help prevent physician and staff burnout, it leads to satisfied, happier employees and healthier patients.