

In May of 2016, the Medical Society of the State of New York (MSSNY) created a Stress and Burnout Task Force. This Task Force was charged to formulate a strategy and plan of action to fight burnout and reduce stress among the constituents of MSSNY. The following article is the fifth of a miniseries that addresses the following topics: the problem of burnout, current state of the State (burnout survey), solutions at the individual and organizational level, and opportunities for advocacy.

Burnout: Advocacy Efforts

Introduction

The present crisis of burnout faced by physicians—along with, many individuals in all aspects of our society-- negatively impacts work performance and general health. A 2014 survey found that health care professionals-- and physicians in particular- are affected by a reported range of burnout of more than 50% in almost every medical specialty..¹

In a recent survey of NYS physicians conducted by MSSNY, this same statistic was confirmed among physicians at various points in their careers.² The characteristics of burnout include emotional exhaustion, depersonalization with loss of empathy, and the feeling of lack of worth in one's job performance. This creates an environment where public safety is affected, as burnout may lead to an increase in medical errors.³ To help reverse this trend and improve physician wellness, we need a better understanding of the issue. In addition, increased advocacy by - and for - physicians is necessary.

This article seeks to provide both insight into the problem of burnout and the motivation for individual physicians to become involved in helping to effect change.

Discussion

Studies show that all physician practice models are affected by burnout, and the loss of autonomy and control to other authorities has a very deleterious effect on physicians' job satisfaction. These factors also dramatically increase the stress level in all aspects of the delivery of care. It is also recognized that 80% of the stressors are organizational/systemically based, as opposed to individually generated.

We have been living in a medical culture where time and effort is spent creating steps to maintaining our ability to cope with the increasing burden of regulation and practice change, rather than finding ways to improve the system. We have allowed other organizations to decide our career paths and take the joy out of medicine.

MSSNY and County Medical Societies have been actively involved with the state legislature, insurance carriers, regulatory authorities and society to look for ways to decrease the mushrooming burdens of approval and documentation, most with no proven benefit. We need to strive to have the recognition of the "Quadruple Aim" where the care provider takes equal recognition with cost, quality, and patient satisfaction in the goals of health care.

¹ Shanafelt TD, et al. "Changes in Burnout and Satisfaction With Work-Life Balance in Physicians and the General US Working Population Between 2011 and 2014." *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*. 90(12): 1600 – 1613.

² Atallah F, Privitera MR. Physician Burnout - The State of the State. MSSNY Talk Force on Physician Stress and Burnout Survey Findings. *Medical Society of the State of New York's News of New York*. Vol 73 (8): 6-8.

³ Shanafelt TD, Balch CM, Bechamps G, Russell T, Dyrbye L, Satele Det al. Burnout and medical errors among American surgeons. *Ann Surg*. 2010 Jun;251(6):995-1000.

Accomplishing these goals will require all New York State physicians to become involved with MSSNY and other influential organizations.

A Personal Perspective

During my years in medical school and residency, my lack of knowledge and understanding brought about feelings of inadequacy. I had colleagues who were not able to admit weakness and did not know where to look for help and support. I witnessed addictive behaviors in my peers and inappropriate treatment of them by superiors and did not know where to turn to get help or support for those individuals. Tragically, one colleague in particular died by suicide several years later as a result of some of these circumstances.

As a result of these experiences, I made the decision to become actively involved in advocacy for physicians. I saw the need to help my peers find balance and wellness in their lives. All physicians should know they are given a very important privilege in the social contract they receive from society to care for their patients' health and well being. This requires a commitment by the profession of self regulating their performance and conduct and when we breach that oath, we have a duty to report the misconduct or behavior.

Although I provided extensive mentoring over the years, my formal advocacy began when I was asked to serve on the Board of Professional Medical Conduct. Six years ago, I took over Chairmanship of the Board. Although there are board members who keep their positions quiet, I have believed it is important to acknowledge my role. It is a way of showing New York State physicians that there are those who not only accept the position to protect the public, but are there to see they receive due process and care about their wellness. The goal is to keep physicians in active practice if their behavior and performance permit. This work has offered me the opportunity to meet with the MSSNY Board several times to address their concerns and work to improve the understanding and relationship between the two entities.

Commitment to this issue has brought new opportunities, including my increased responsibility at the Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB). As chair, I selected burnout and wellness as my platform for the FSMB to engage and help state boards become involved in addressing their role and making an impact. It also afforded me the opportunity to work with the leadership of the Federation of State Physician Health Programs to learn of their methods to encourage physician wellness. The additional activity that has opened for me is the inclusion as the FSMB representative to the National Academy of Medicine Action Collaborative for Physician Wellness and Resilience. This is a major national effort to address the crisis and find potential solutions.

Nationally, FSMB is involved with the ACGME, AMA, AAMC and their physician wellness initiatives that support the state board's involvement. Additionally, there is an FSMB workgroup meeting and pending report that addresses the states' perspectives on burnout issues. There are 14 national organizations, each of whom gives guidance to state medical boards' involvement in this workgroup that will produce additional suggestions for improving the working environment for physicians.

MSSNY is very active at the state level, following a successful survey of over 1,500 physicians in NYS that helped identify the top 10 stressors to physicians. Through this work it was recognized that 80% of the stressors are systemic, which strengthens the importance of strong advocacy engagement and PAC support for all physicians. MSSNY is also developing a peer support program as a resource to physicians who could find relief in the support of colleagues with a shared experience. Finally, the Monroe County Medical Society,

of which I am a member, has developed a compendium of resources to support physicians and is available on their website. This includes: free Android/iPhone applications for guided meditation; books, videos, podcasts and articles related to stress/anxiety/burnout; a partnership with local wellness centers that offer drop in yoga and meditation programs as well as access to acupuncturists, nutritionists and natural food selections; and private practice therapists who have marked experience in working with physicians and who will prioritize scheduling for physicians who reach out in need.

Now is the time to engage. Now is the time to support the work of the State and County medical societies and join other physicians to amplify our voices. The more voices at the table, the louder we are, and easier we are to hear. MSSNY has established a Physician Advocacy Network but it only operates with our support. We as physicians must own the following items:

1. Encourage colleagues to join (and perhaps re-join) MSSNY. Membership is everyone's job. If you aren't sure what to say, call Eunice Skelly: (516) 488-6100 ext. 389 or your County Medical Society Executive Director.
2. Keep an eye out for Advocacy Alerts from MSSNY and/or your County Medical Society and communicate with your legislator's office. MSSNY's Grassroots Action Center is easy to use and in less than 3 minutes you can send well written letters to your legislators. Phone calls are just as simple – and if you prefer to leave a voicemail, call in the evening and leave a message. They keep track of the calls and letters they receive, and it really does make a difference.
3. Meet with your legislators, share your concerns and educate them on what is important to physicians and our patients. If you aren't sure where to start, call Moe Auster at (518) 465-8085 ext. 319 and ask how you can get started. Depending on your County, the Executive Director may join you in those meetings. Remember that even if you meet with staff of the legislator these meetings are reported back to them. Every contact with your legislator's office makes a difference.

We want to encourage physicians to understand the opportunities that exist to help fulfill not only their own goals-- but also to assist in maintaining the health and wellness of the profession. In so doing, we are protecting the public by providing quality health care for all of society.

MSSNY and the County Medical Societies all have multiple ongoing initiatives to address all of the points made in this article. We require your backing and active involvement to make the necessary changes—and to bring the joy back to medicine!

Consider identifying ways that you can personally monitor your own wellbeing leveraging measurements discussed in the previous article. We encourage you to reach out to your county or state medical society to get involved, and further encourage you to share this article with just one of your colleagues who is not a MSSNY member. You are the best communicator of the value of our work.

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