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Decline in physician burnout: New survey indicates positive trends

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The Buzz This Week

Physician burnout has seen a notable decline, with the latest American Medical Association (AMA) survey reporting that less than 50% of physicians now experience burnout symptoms. This marks the first time since the start of the pandemic that burnout rates have dipped below this threshold. According to the 2023 AMA Organizational Biopsy report, burnout fell from 53% in 2022 to 48.2% this year, following a peak of 62.8% in 2021.

The survey, which gathered responses from around 12,400 physicians, also highlights an increase in job satisfaction and a greater sense of being valued. Physicians' job satisfaction improved from 68% in 2022 to 72.1% in 2023. Those who felt valued by their organizations rose from 46.3% to 50.4%. These changes suggest positive shifts in the work environment for many healthcare providers. Additionally, newer physicians (with 1 to 5 years of experience) reported a significant reduction in burnout, from 54% in 2022 to 46.7% in 2023, indicating positive trends in early career support.

Dr. Christina Maslach, a leading researcher in the field of burnout, defines the condition as a three-dimensional syndrome characterized by:

- Emotional exhaustion: This involves feelings of being drained and fatigued of emotional energy due to the psychological demands of work.
- Depersonalization: This refers to a cynical or detached attitude toward work and people served.
- Reduced personal accomplishment: This encompasses feelings of negative professional self-evaluation and doubts about their ability to perform the job effectively.

Key factors contributing to burnout include excessive administrative tasks, insufficient support staff, and high job stress. Organizations that have implemented targeted interventions, such as better innovative inbox management and optimized team delegation, have seen positive results in reducing burnout and enhancing job satisfaction.

Additionally, legislative measures like the Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act (industry-supported legislation passed in 2022 to fund work on healthcare provider mental health) are playing a crucial role in improving mental health support for the healthcare workforce. This act has funneled more than \$100 million in federal dollars into programs aimed at reducing burnout and improving well-being for the healthcare workforce. However, the funding will expire next year unless Congress reauthorizes the program through 2029.

Despite this progress, certain specialties continue to report high burnout rates, including emergency medicine, internal medicine, OB-GYN, and family medicine—although these fields have seen some declines from previous years. In addition, the situation for other healthcare professionals is concerning. A study published in JAMA Network Open found that 26% of nurses left healthcare due to burnout or emotional exhaustion during the period from 2018 to 2021. Additionally, a recent Medscape report revealed that seven in 10 nurse practitioners experience burnout or depression, a rate that has remained consistent over the past 3 years. These findings highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing burnout across the entire healthcare workforce, not just among physicians.

Why It Matters

While the decline in physician burnout is positive news, the issue remains a critical challenge for the healthcare industry. Nearly half of physicians still experience burnout, which is much too high. This statistic underscores the ongoing need for comprehensive solutions. Moreover, the long-term implications for patient care and the healthcare workforce are significant.

The looming physician shortage, projected to reach up to 124,000 by 2034, exacerbates the urgency of addressing burnout. Retaining physicians is essential to ensuring access to quality care for patients. Burnout is a key factor contributing to physician turnover, with two in five physicians considering leaving their practice within 5 years because of burnout.

The economic impact of physician burnout is substantial, costing the US healthcare system an estimated \$4.6 billion annually due to turnover and lost clinical hours. This financial burden further strains an already overstretched system. While progress has been made, sustained efforts are required to address the root causes of burnout. Those include the reduction of administrative burdens, improvement in work conditions, and consistent provision of adequate support staff.

The problem of burnout extends beyond physicians. Nurses and other healthcare professionals also face high rates of burnout, which further exacerbates staffing shortages and impacts patient care quality. Innovative approaches, such as expanding the role of advanced practice providers (APPs), may also be necessary to alleviate the strain on physicians and improve patient access to care. Organizations should

also implement measures to stem burnout for health professionals in an expanded role. Ultimately, creating a sustainable and fulfilling work environment for all healthcare professionals is essential to ensuring the long-term health of the healthcare system.

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