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U.S.

Physician Burnout Is Widespread, Especially Among Those in Midcareer

About half of doctors surveyed would take a big pay cut to aid work-life balance, report says



Overall, 42% of the physicians surveyed across 29 specialties reported feeling some sense of burnout. PHOTO: PHILIP MONTGOMERY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Brianna Abbott

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Physicians between the ages of 40 and 54 experience a higher rate of burnout than older or younger doctors, according to a recent survey of more than 15,000 physicians who cited administrative tasks and work hours as key drivers of their stress.

Nearly half of Generation X physicians who were surveyed said they felt burned out, compared with 39% of baby boomers, ages 55 to 73, and 38% of millennials, ages 25 to 39. Roughly half of all the doctors surveyed also said that they would be willing to take a substantial pay cut to achieve a better work-life balance.

Burnout is often described as long-term, unresolved, work-related stress that leads to cynicism, detachment, exhaustion and lack of a sense of personal accomplishment. Burnout can occur in any profession, especially those that are high-stress, such as lawyers or emergency services. A 2018 Gallup poll of 7,500 full-time employees found that 23% of

employees reported being burned out at work very often or always, and 44% reported feeling burned out sometimes.

Burnout is particularly pervasive among health-care workers, such as physicians or nurses, researchers say. Risk for burnout among physicians is significantly greater than that of general U.S. working adults, and physicians also report being less satisfied with their work-life balance, according to a 2019 study published in Mayo Clinic Proceedings.

Overall, 42% of the physicians in the new survey, across 29 specialties, reported feeling some sense of burnout, down slightly from 46% in 2015. The report, published on Wednesday by medical-information platform Medscape, breaks down the generational differences in burnout and how doctors cope with the symptoms that are widespread throughout the profession.

“There are a lot more similarities than differences, and what that highlights is that burnout in medicine right now is really an entire-profession problem,” said Colin West, a professor of medicine at the Mayo Clinic who researches physician well-being. “There’s really no age group, career stage, gender or specialty that’s immune from these issues.”

In recent years, hospitals, health systems and advocacy groups have tried to curb the problem by starting wellness programs, hiring chief wellness officers or attempting to reduce administrative tasks for nurses and physicians.

Still, high rates of burnout persist among the medical community, from medical-school students to seasoned professionals, and more than two-thirds of all physicians surveyed in the Medscape report said that burnout had an impact on their personal relationships. Nearly one in five physicians also reported that they are depressed, with the highest rate, 18%, reported by Gen Xers.

The stage of a doctor’s career might account for much of the age-related differences, rather than something inherently generational, say researchers who study physician well-being. Generation X doctors are at a pivotal point in their professional and personal lives, and the heightened pressures or desire for a career shift might contribute to their increased levels of burnout. They are simultaneously up for promotions at work or figuring out the next step in their career path, as well as potentially raising children at home or caring for older parents, all while continuing to practice medicine.

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“I am a Gen X physician. I ended up leaving a good practice to start my own practice. The takeover of medicine by large for-profit style networks has put a big emphasis on efficiency, charting, and billing. These tasks, although part of the job, are the least important side of medicine. Our jobs aren't a bunch of keystrokes. The tone, the compassion, the hand hold, the look of the eye—these are never charted, but they are the connections that keep us going, and lend empathy to our patients.” — Scott Matson

“The Gen Xers are in the prime of their professional careers, at their busiest and perhaps most stressed point, and perhaps with more family competing pressures than younger physicians,” said Gary Price, the president of the Physicians Foundation, a nonprofit group that advocates for physicians.

Women physicians, who make up a greater portion of the younger generations, also face higher rates of burnout. Though the exact reason for the disparity isn't clear, several societal factors, including time spent on domestic responsibilities, discrimination and harassment, likely play a role, Dr. West said.

Some 55% of physicians reported that administrative tasks are the main driver of burnout, and spending too many hours at work was also a top contributor across the board. But millennial and Gen X doctors also cited a lack of respect from administrators, employers or colleagues as a top concern, while boomers highlighted increased computerization and electronic medical records.

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The boomers “were the ones that saw the big change from paper charts,” said Leslie Kane, the senior director of Medscape’s Business of Medicine site. Because of the shift to electronic health records, doctors often note spending less time communicating with patients, a change that boomers would also notice more acutely, she said.

But while millennials are more satisfied with electronic medical records than previous generations, most of them are still dissatisfied with the system, said Tait Shanafelt, chief wellness officer at Stanford Medicine and director of its WellMD Center. “That group, as much as anyone, says, ‘Why can’t this be like my iPhone?’” said Dr. Shanafelt. “I think they navigate it better, but they still recognize its inefficiencies.”

The majority of millennial doctors said that they coped by sleeping or talking with family members and friends, but the top two responses from Gen X or boomers were exercise and isolating themselves from others.

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