

## THE REAL COST OF PHYSICIAN BURNOUT

By Ken Levin



Depending upon when you became a practicing physician, there was a time when starting and building a medical practice was rewarding. It was once one of the great bastions of small business entrepreneurs; hanging a shingle on the doorpost was the commencement of a journey inspired to help people in need while at the same time creating financial success and security.

Today, the challenges facing new and seasoned healthcare providers is greater than it has ever been. Physicians are now confronted by a highly stressful, complex marketplace requiring a broad understanding of the human condition.

Clinician burnout is pervasive in the healthcare industry, yet most healthcare providers and leaders are unsure how to solve the issue. Indeed, before one can attempt to solve an issue, they need to clearly recognize that the issue exists.

### **Burnout is real, Burnout is measureable, and Burnout can be mitigated.**

In a 2014 Mayo Clinic/AMA survey to evaluate the prevalence of burnout and satisfaction with work-life balance, more than half of the 6,880 United States physicians polled reported at least one symptom of burnout. The study found between 2011 and 2014 the rate of physician burnout rose more than 10 percent. The study used the Maslach Burnout Inventory assessment tool to measure emotional exhaustion and a loss of empathy for patients among doctors.

The prevalence of burnout in healthcare should be cause for concern, not only for the clinicians who experience it, but for all practices and organizations for whom they work. Physician burnout may be a sign that something is amiss within the practice. Without recognition and intervention it can evolve into a systemic dysfunction preventing an organization from achieving the desired outcomes of today's value-based care efforts.

### **The Impact of Physician Burnout**

The Mayo Clinic/AMA study, and a Medscape lifestyle survey of physicians reported similar findings, defining burnout as “loss of enthusiasm for work, feelings of cynicism, and a low sense of personal accomplishment.” Most notably, burnout is helped little, or sometimes not at all, by taking a break or time off. In other words, it's much more serious than just feeling tired or exhausted.

Physician burnout has consequences for everyone involved in the practice, including patients, but it is the clinicians themselves who are are hardest hit of all.

### **Pinning Down the Cause of Burnout: Demands vs. Resources**

Physician burnout occurs when there is an imbalance between a person and their job. Leading researchers in the field, Christina Maslach, Ph.D and Michael Leiter, Ph.D., have concluded these mismatches often occur in six key areas of the work environment:

- Workload-the amount of work to be done in a specific period of time
- Control-the opportunity to make choices and decisions
- Reward-the recognition (financial and social) received for job contributions
- Community-the social context of the work environment
- Fairness-the presence of consistent and equitable rules
- Values-the consistency between an employee's and organization's values

Ultimately, no matter what provokes it or how it manifests, the number one cause of physician burnout is workplace stress.

The costs associated with the loss and replacement of a single primary care physician starts at \$250,000, according to the New England Journal of Medicine Career Center. The real cost can exceed \$1 million. Read “The Shocking Cost of Physician Turnover” to see what CMOs across the country are saying about physician retention issues.