

## **Keeping it Fresh...Avoiding Burnout**

**Susan Mockus Parks, MD**

Burnout is a syndrome seen in virtually every career. It is found in individuals under significant amounts of stress/pressure in the workplace. The literature is replete with articles about physicians' risk of burnout. Physicians are at risk for burnout due to the high intensity of their work. The signs and symptoms of burnout include: emotional exhaustion, cynicism, perceived clinical ineffectiveness and a sense of depersonalization of relationships with co-workers.<sup>1</sup> Burnout is associated with several consequences including: poor health, poor job performance and can contribute to issues such as alcoholism and drug addiction.<sup>1</sup> The medical literature does describe the burnout risk by medical specialty, academic vs non-academic careers but does not look specifically at type of educational position such as fellowship or residency directors.

Importantly, one study on physician career satisfaction found that geriatric internal medicine had the highest level of job satisfaction.<sup>2</sup>

The seeds of burnout are hypothesized to begin in medical school or residency training. In these settings, "fatigue and exhaustion are often the norm."<sup>1</sup> Hopefully, the changes in training may help in lowering these risk factors for burnout.

### **Work stressors:**

Physicians experience multiple work stressors including<sup>1</sup>: financial debt<sup>1</sup>, insurance audits<sup>1</sup>, malpractice<sup>1</sup>, documentation challenges, long work hours...

One article analyzed why early-career women physicians left their academic positions and found these key reasons: lack of role models for combining career and family responsibilities, frustrations with research, poor mentorship, work-life balance and the issues around institutional environment.<sup>3</sup>

### **How can we prevent burnout?**

"Promote personal and professional well-being on all levels: physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual."<sup>1</sup> What are some ideas on how to achieve this? One article suggests the following ideas: promoting balance through confidential support groups, paid memberships to gyms, requiring physicians to have their own PCPs, flexible scheduling for births, caring for parents, etc.<sup>1</sup> Another article surveyed physicians to see what works and found six main things: spending time with family and friends, religious or spiritual activity, self-care, finding meaning in work, setting limits at work, adopting a healthy philosophical outlook such as being positive or focusing on success.<sup>4</sup>

One article about work-life balance among academic surgeons outlines the complexity of this process.<sup>5</sup> Individuals make choices based on: influential values, setting boundaries, trade-offs in an effort to seek a balance between their work and personal lives.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, full-time and part-time academic IM physicians report similar levels of job satisfaction.<sup>6</sup>

**Think about:**

- What are some personal decisions you can make to improve your own personal-professional balance?
- How can you incorporate these issues into your fellowship curriculum?
- Do you consider you and your faculty colleagues good role models for achieving personal-professional balance?
- Do you consider this topic a part of your formal or informal curriculum?
- What factors about being a fellowship director are challenges to your overall job satisfaction?
- What factors about being a fellowship director contribute to your overall job satisfaction?

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