

PHYSICIANS ARE WORKING MORE, ENJOYING IT LESS

By Damon Adams,
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One Friday morning in his Tampa office, David Lubin, MD, saw 27 patients in four hours.

"I was kind of beat," he said.

Another time, the family doctor tried to order a test to see whether a patient had cancer in her abdomen. Before it would cover the test, the insurance company asked whether the woman had cancer in her abdomen.

"I said, 'How do I know, that's why I want to order the test.' "

Such stresses have eaten away at Dr. Lubin's zest for the medical profession. And he isn't alone.

In a recent physician survey conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, about six in 10 physicians said their enthusiasm for practicing medicine has dropped during the last five years. And they think their colleagues feel the same way: 87% of the physicians surveyed said the overall morale of physicians has decreased in five years. Three in four doctors said managed care has had a negative impact on how they practice medicine, according to the nonprofit foundation's study, which looked at doctors' views of their profession as part of its National Survey of Physicians. The figures were based on answers from 2,608 physicians who responded to a mail survey from March 26 through Oct. 11, 2001.

The majority of doctors said managed care has increased paperwork and overhead costs for physicians' practices. A majority also said managed care has decreased the amount of time spent with patients, the ability of patients to see specialists and the quality of health care.

"Since managed care has become a part of our health system, physicians see it as having negative influences," said Mollyann Brodie, PhD, the Kaiser foundation's vice president for public opinion and media research.

Dr. Lubin, a physician for 25 years, tries to shrug off the problems. Things aren't bad enough that he's ready to get out. His patients keep him going. "Every day I go, 'Why do I put up with this crap?' The reason I put up with the crap is because it's my business. It's my profession. I'm here to take care of patients," Dr. Lubin said. "Although the insurance companies make it difficult at times, that's what I've been trained to do."

Creeping dissatisfaction

Physicians have voiced similar concerns in previous studies: A physician survey in the Aug. 10/24, 1998, Archives of Internal Medicine found many doctors blaming managed care for negative effects on the physician-patient relationship, ability to carry out ethical obligations and quality of care. The AMA's "Physician Opinion on Health Care Issues: 1997" showed many doctors unhappy with managed care's effect on a doctor's independence, paperwork and clinical decisions.

A survey of 300 physicians 50 and older revealed that 38% planned to retire in one to three years. And 56% said managed care was the biggest source of frustration, according to the 1999-2000 survey by Merritt, Hawkins & Associates, a physician search and consulting firm in Texas.

Stephen Hanson, MD, a family physician in Osakis, Minn., has thought about quitting. He said insurance companies have taken away a physician's independence when it comes to making decisions about patient care.

Dr. Hanson, who has been in practice for 32 years, is 62. He wants to work at least until he's 65. So he has developed some coping mechanisms to help him deal with discontent. He jogs and bikes, works out at the gym and attends church.

Sheldon Cohen, MD, a psychiatrist in Atlanta, said the Kaiser survey's findings ring true.

Practicing medicine, he said, is not as fun or as satisfying as it was 50 years ago, when he started seeing patients. He said frivolous lawsuits have fueled the rise in professional liability insurance rates, prompting some doctors to close their practices or to stop offering higher-risk services.

Dr. Cohen also cites constraints placed on doctors by managed care. He no longer accepts private insurance, although he still sees Medicare patients.

"I don't know of anybody who is enjoying the practice of medicine the way they once did," he said. "The biggest things are a lack of gratification and a lack of relationships with patients."

Too many demands, not enough independence

The Kaiser survey found higher percentages of doctors who were dissatisfied with

three major aspects of practice:

- 74% were dissatisfied with the amount of hours spent on administrative duties compared with patient care.
- 56% were unhappy with the time left for outside interests, family and friends.
- 54% were dissatisfied with the level of autonomy in clinical decisions.

"Most doctors feel they're having excessive demands placed on their time and demands on how they should practice medicine," said J. Edward Hill, MD, chair-elect of the AMA Board of Trustees and a family physician in Tupelo, Miss. "Most doctors I know feel like there's a loss of respect for the medical profession."

6 in 10 physicians say their enthusiasm is waning.

The AMA has been chipping away at some of the issues that contribute to the discontent with managed care. It has worked for passage of prompt-payment laws and a Patients' Bill of Rights. The Association has a private sector advocacy group that helps members take on managed care companies. And the AMA continues to monitor managed care through its Health Plan Complaint Form, which allows all doctors to detail problems they encounter with health plans.

Most recently, the Association has worked to introduce tort reform legislation as a way to alleviate medical liability woes that are also affecting physician morale.

Dr. Hill said managed care hassles, rising medical liability rates, less time with patients and more paperwork stack up and bring doctors' fulfillment down. "All those things together are causing frustration and making them feel a little less satisfied."

But on the brighter side

All in all, Dr. Hill still prefers doctoring to anything else. "The medical profession is still the most exciting profession. It's still the most rewarding, even with all the frustrations." There are also some inklings of optimism in the Kaiser survey.

Most physicians said they are satisfied with the continuity of relationships with their patients (84%); the professional challenges of their practices (79%) and their incomes (57%).

Despite their areas of dissatisfaction, about half of the doctors surveyed said they would recommend the medical profession to a young person today. That number has increased slightly, from 45% to 53% since 1981, when a foundation survey posed a similar question. Dr. Hanson said he still recommended a medical career to his nephew, now a third-year medical student. When his nephew asked for his opinion, Dr. Hanson emphasized the positive -- making a difference in patients' lives.

"I tell him there are pros and cons, but I encourage him," Dr. Hanson said.

Ross Black, MD, a family physician in Ohio, said patients are the ones impacted by a doctor's attitude. Doctors should accept that change is a natural part of life -- and learn to roll with it. "If I let all this stuff get in my way, then I'm losing focus of what I'm really doing," Dr. Black said, "and that's caring for people."