

Physician burnout: part III

personal and professional balance

by Robin C. Robertson, MBA
Michael Kaufmann, MD, OMA Physician Health Program



In recent months, the Physician Health Program has published two columns on the topic of physician burnout. The first, which appeared in the November 2001 OMR, provided an overview of the causes and conditions that can lead to physician burnout. A second column, published in

January 2002, described the basic components of burnout prevention and health maintenance.

Both articles contained an Ontario family physician's first-hand account of professional and personal decline, recovery and renewal.

This month, the same physician describes his successful, ongoing efforts to maintain a healthy balance between personal and professional needs and responsibilities.

The account is followed by an overview of professional and workplace considerations in the management and prevention of physician burnout.

"Each day on the way to work, I park my car and walk the short distance to the office — all the while looking for familiar faces (patients, friends, shopkeepers) so that I can say 'good morning.'

I thank God for what I have, and where I am with my life. I am finally practising the type of medicine that I love, and am doing so in a healthy manner that suits my needs.

Although balancing work, home (family and friends), and self-care is still a challenge, most of the time I

feel like I'm winning. But this feeling has not come without a great deal of hard work.

The first thing I had to do was overcome the desire to just stop practising altogether.

A journal article on the topic of managing the needs of home life and practice served as a considerable help. The article gave me 'permission' to begin thinking that perhaps I could still practise medicine, but in a different way.

Shortly thereafter, I undertook to document my personal goals. The following is a journal entry from the summer of 2000:

'My goals:

- To be healthy emotionally, spiritually and physically.
- To be happy and excited about work.
- To *not* feel overwhelmed, unsatisfied, angry and resentful.

When I am not healthy, I cannot provide the best possible care for my patients. To be healthy, I must:

1. Know my boundaries and share them with others.
2. Work on balance between work, home and self.
3. Do more of the type of practice that I enjoy.

4. Talk about my stress and feelings and do something about it, knowing that I can't change the system myself, but that, individually, I can have a better day.'

I had already worked hard at taking care of myself, making time to do the things that I enjoy.

I had been working on my spiritual healing as well. This provided the foundation that gave me the strength and courage to embark on the journey of making changes at work.

I began by setting boundaries. I worked with my psychologist to accept the need to establish boundaries, and then proceeded to put them in place.

I had to work hard on overcoming feelings of guilt, and the fear of the possible consequences that I would face when I communicated these boundaries to my patients.

I realized, however, that once I became comfortable with setting boundaries, and communicating them clearly to patients, that they, for the most part, would understand and respect my position.

Although I wasn't able to change my workplace immediately, this was an example of how I was able to make an important initial step forward.

I felt more freedom, which in turn led to the realization that I did have choices.

This empowered me to relinquish on-call and hospital work (which was causing me the most stress), and eventually leave my practice to start a new practice doing the type of medicine that I love.

This could not have happened without support from family, friends, colleagues, and other professionals.

Working through the Physician Health Program's "12-Steps for Medical Professionals Who Seek Rehumanizing" was also extremely helpful. (Note: The "12 Steps" appear in the October 1999-April 2000 issues of the *Ontario Medical Review*, and are posted on the Physician Health Web site at: www.phpoma.org/articles.html).

Through all of this, I continued to work on my spiritual healing. Many days I asked God for answers and direction. The answers came slowly through other people who were also walking this path.

Eventually, my path was revealed to me, and I had the strength and courage to move forward and practise medicine in the way that was meant for me.

I am sharing my story with the hope that others will read it and see that change is possible, and balance is possible."

Introduction

Burnout occurs when the perception of personal stress places an individual in a position of "energy overdraft."

People suffering from the early phases of burnout are often able to extricate themselves from the situations at hand.

However, as the condition progresses through its various stages, those affected often require professional help in order to recover.

Research on burnout and the "phase model"¹ shows that individuals in the earliest phase have surplus emotional resources available to cope with stressors, while those in

the final phase are in a deficit condition.

The following will consider issues pertinent in the medical workplace and across the profession as a whole.

Individual considerations and strategies in the workplace

Each of us brings our "personhood" — which includes our physical, emotional and spiritual selves — to work each day. The following steps suggest a path to help influence work so that it becomes more meaningful, even joyful, given who we are as individuals:

- *Control thoughts and attitudes:* Three parents of young children are sitting in a busy, noisy playground. When asked what they are doing, the first parent responds, "I am sleep-deprived and exhausted, but I have to be here to watch these kids play." The second responds: "I am doing my job as a parent by providing a safe and caring environment for my kids to play." The third responds: "I am raising future physicians and healers, and this is the most important place I could be right now."

All three parents are doing the same work, yet each views the world and their work very differently. The connection between their respective views and levels of satisfaction is obvious.

Do you view your work in a way that contributes to positive feelings, enhances the level of service you provide, and ultimately changes the environment in which you work?

- *Know and live your values and goals:* When did you last analyze your values and goals to ensure that they are reflected in your professional practice? Is the amount of energy you expend in the workplace creating a lifestyle that you want to sustain?

Consider a physician with a young family, who is working a schedule of extended hours in order to sustain a material lifestyle that, upon closer examination, is neither meeting the needs of his family, nor fulfilling his personal views on child rearing. Clearly, something must change.

The physician may, for example, choose to restrict lifestyle expenses, such as travel or entertainment, or perhaps adopt a more modest resi-

dence, in order to provide the opportunity to work fewer hours and spend more time with the young children. This way of living may be more in line with the physician's personal values.

- *Understand your personality and preferences:* Consider a physician who received many accolades and rewards for his laboratory research.

Out of a desire to examine his life and better balance the time spent between work and family, the physician kept a log over a two-week period, along with a note describing how each area of work made him feel.

The analysis showed clearly that work with patients in a clinical setting, surrounded by a team of health-care workers, made the physician feel energized and fulfilled.

His lab research, on the other hand, made him feel worn out, actually resulting in stomach aches.

The journal exercise helped the physician to decide not to reapply

for research funding, and to focus instead on clinical work.

- *Be present for the moments of wonder:* Physicians have the opportunity to experience wonder daily in life. Challenge yourself each day to find something in your work that inspires you.

We cannot always control the feedback received from others, but we can take notice of that which moves us and is a natural part of our work.

- *Set boundaries:* Each day, you are bombarded by demands from patients and others. Each of these patients, individually, is unaware of the cumulative effect these demands may have. However, you are well aware of the stress and strain you experience. Only you can establish boundaries to protect yourself.

There are two essential boundaries to set: those pertaining to personal time, and those that protect family time. Along with boundary

setting comes the skill and discipline needed to enforce them. Learn how to say "no."

Gather people around you and seek their help to encourage you to stick to your plan. The receptionist or office manager can be one of your greatest allies if he or she is aware of, and trained in, how to protect your boundaries.

Workplace considerations: what makes a healthy workplace?

A health-care professional who works in a community hospital was asked, "What would make your workplace a healthier place to be?" Her response: "Reduce the hierarchy, red tape and politics," adding, "We say we are patient-focused, and that's what draws me to the work, but it seems to be forgotten sometimes."

This response mirrors what we know about healthy workplaces. Workplaces that allow us to thrive

Physician Health

embody a combination of factors:

- The structure of the organization facilitates our work — hierarchies can become too steep, thus impeding good decision-making, and diminishing an organization's flexibility and ability to respond.
- Systems, policies and procedures enhance workflow in a meaningful way. They do not create barriers or prevent staff from living out a core value, such as patient-centred care. They do not hold people back from doing what is right!
- The culture facilitates trust, open communication, and accountability. Culture is like the air quality in a building — it is impossible to see, and yet we know whether it is healthy or not.
- Positive "people practices" create satisfying work.
- People are provided with opportunities to contribute to the greater whole.

To feel good about our work, the work itself must provide a balanced exchange of energy and remuneration that is in line with our values and goals; a sense of accomplishment and that our gifts are being utilized; a sense that we are appreciated by others; and finally, a balance between the job demands and our ability to meet or control those demands.

Communication, support for one another, agreement on workplace norms — including how disagreements will be handled — are areas within a work group's influence.

High-performing workplaces are known for their willingness to invest time and energy into creating healthy working teams.

Schedule time as a group to discuss aspects of the workplace. Hire a facilitator, if necessary, to gather data on the current situation, assist the group in identifying current gaps and future goals, and then create a plan for change.

Systemic considerations

Creating satisfaction and preventing burnout in medical practice is a challenge that requires attention at every level, from the beginning of medical training to retirement and beyond. Indeed, a change in the culture of medicine is indicated.

Medical schools need to continue to improve training for students in the principles and values of emotional intelligence, self-awareness and self-care, along with the core curriculum.

Clinical teachers must model these skills and behaviours, and abandon once and for all the attitude that sacrificing personal health for that of patients is a virtue. Viewed in the context of burnout and dwindling physician human resources, this is an absurd and dangerous belief.

Continuing education opportunities increasingly include physician health as a theme or component. Medical communities must be en-

Physician Health

couraged to seek and create events that support doctors' health.

Hospital policies can be enhanced to acknowledge the importance of staff health, including physician health, as a core value.

Hospitals can form physician health committees. Medical associations, both provincial and national, can and do support these policies and practices, but there is room for improvement.

The profession must acknowledge and reward doctors who live balanced, self-respecting lives.

Conclusion

When there is balance in our lives we are more resilient. Resilience is im-

portant when it comes to stress and burnout.

It's tempting to estimate the impact of stress in one's life simply by counting the number and severity of stressors. But we each experience stress differently, and what may be devastating to one person, can be energizing to another.

Underlying both reactions is an individual's life balance — emotional, social, intellectual, spiritual, occupational, financial and physical — or lack thereof.

Living in balance provides the energy supply we require to deal with stress, avoid burnout, and extract the greatest meaning and joy from everything life has to offer.

OMR

Reference

Golembiewski RT, et al. Estimates of burnout in public agencies: Worldwide, how many employees have which degrees of burnout, and with what consequences? *Public Administration Review*; Jan/Feb 1998:Vol. 58(1).

Ms. Robertson is the prevention and education director of the Alberta Medical Association Physician and Family Support Program.

Dr. Kaufmann, CCFP, FCFP, a former family practitioner, is medical director of the OMA Physician Health Program. Dr. Kaufmann is certified in addiction medicine by the American Society of Addiction Medicine.