

Can we Still Enjoy Being a Physician?

Alan H. Rosenstein MD, MBA

Practicing Internist and Consultant in Behavioral Management, San Francisco, CA

In order to become a physician it takes a strong ego, determination, dedication, and willingness to sacrifice one's soul in order to get through all the trials and tribulations of medical training and practice dynamics. For older generation physicians there was a great reward at the end of the tunnel. The feeling of respect, pride, and accomplishment was well worth it. We enjoyed the hands-on care and our unique abilities to diagnose and manage symptoms and disease. For younger physicians there's the joy of using technology to enhance care delivery. Unfortunately, the world has changed. Medicine has evolved from a cottage industry to become more of a structured business focusing more on profits and productivity than care relationships. Issues related to loss of idealism, loss of autonomy, more external intrusion, and increasing non-clinical demands have taxed physician capacity and intestinal fortitude. The situation has been further aggravated by the current COVID crisis. Limited access and telemedicine have changed the healthcare landscape. All these issues have led to alarming rates of dissatisfaction, stress, and burnout, resulting in many physicians choosing to leave medical practice and many more questioning what they are doing. Manpower shortages have become the number one medical priority. So what can we do to keep our physicians going?

The first step is to recognize the causes. Common causes include more external interference, increasing time demands spent on non-clinical tasks, time spent on electronic medical record documentation, changing workflow dynamics, incentives, and responsibilities, a greater focus on productivity and performance metric accountability, and a general sense of loss of control. The COVID crisis has added additional concerns about access, resources, and safety. So what can we do?

Unfortunately, we can't rely on physicians to take steps on their own. Concerns about perceived need, a stoic ego, time, and stigma often impede physician reaction. Many organizations have recognized the impact of stress and burnout on health care providers and have offered a number of different strategies. They may offer training on stress management, resiliency, and mindfulness, provide coaching and counseling, and in some cases individualized behavioral counseling. All these strategies may work to a limited degree, but they depend on individual physician acceptance and compliance. The problem is that it's not an individual physician issue, it's a system issue. Addressing physician concerns about the work environment, culture and leadership, capacity, workload, scheduling, electronic record documentation, and metric accountability is where the true resolutions lie. Listening and responding to physician concerns, making logistical accommodations to help them do their job, and promoting and supporting physician well-being will have the greatest impact on improving physician satisfaction and engagement, and desires to continue to practice.

The key motivation is to return joy and pride to medical practice. Physicians need to be reminded of all the positive things that only they can do. Show respect and recognize the value of their services. Listen, respond, provide support, encourage time off, and say thank you for everything that they do. Physicians are a scarce precious resource. We need to reinvigorate their passion for medical care and restore purpose and meaning to their craft.

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Address for correspondence:

Alan H. Rosenstein MD, MBA, Practicing Internist and Consultant in Behavioral Management, San Francisco, CA.

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