

From the publishers of the *New England Journal of Medicine*

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Survey Results: Doctors Say Morale Is Hurting

Doctors are exhausted. They're burned out. The stress of their work is causing marital and family discord. And nearly 60 percent of physicians who participated in a recent survey have considered leaving the practice of medicine behind.

Those are just a few of the findings of the first American College of Physician Executives Physician Morale Survey. Some of the physicians in the survey are resigned to the idea that low morale is here to stay.

"I think it is safe to say that no physician is optimistic about the future of medicine at this point," one participant wrote. Others seemed downright hopeless.

"One thing that rarely gets mentioned is that unlike other industries that are cyclical, the practice of medicine continually gets worse and worse, more intolerable, more onerous, with absolutely no hope or reason for any optimism either in the near or remote future."

There was little good news.

When asked to rate their own morale on a scale of 1 to 10 — with 1 as very low morale and 10 as very high — a majority of 54 percent of the doctors rated their own morale as 6 or higher, while 46 percent were 5 or lower.

But when asked to rate the morale of the physicians they work with, the numbers took a dive, with 59 percent rating morale at 5 or less, and just 40 percent rating it 6 or higher.

The survey was conducted July 15 through August 1, 2006, and drew responses from 1,205 physicians across the U.S. (A total of 7,000 surveys were mailed, with a response rate of 17 percent.) Judging from more than 330 comments written by those who participated, morale is very shaky.

No Exact Cause

The turbulent medical malpractice climate was actually one of the lowest ranked reasons for doctor discouragement. The number one reason was low reimbursement rates from insurers and government health care plans.

After low reimbursement, the other causes of diminishing morale included loss of autonomy, bureaucratic red tape, patient overload, loss of respect, and the medical malpractice environment.

Although it may seem like a drastic measure to combat the morale problems, the idea of getting out of medicine all together is an option many have considered. Almost 60 percent said they'd thought about it, and nearly 70 percent said they knew of at least one doctor who stopped practicing medicine due to low morale.

"Physicians age 45 and over have gone through a very demoralizing career," one physician wrote. "My peak earning capacity occurred in my eighth year of my 23-year career so far. We have physicians around age 60 who are having to leave practice to find some outside source of income because their overhead is so high in comparison to their ability to generate an adequate income practicing medicine."

Morale Maladies

Low morale manifests itself in various ways in different people. The doctors in the survey listed fatigue as the number one problem, coming in at 77 percent. Emotional burnout, 66 percent, was a close second.

Marital and family discord and depression were experienced by about 32 percent of the respondents, and 4 percent have had suicidal thoughts.

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To combat the low morale, physicians in the survey:

- Talked to fellow physicians about the morale problems (53 percent)
- Searched for a job outside of health care (35 percent)
- Lobbied local, state, or federal government for health care changes (27 percent)
- Sought personal counseling (26 percent)
- Sought substance abuse treatment (1 percent)

An analysis of the survey results compared to demographic information collected in the survey also found that doctors fewer than 50 years of age have slightly lower morale than those over 50. The younger set also suffers higher rates of marital discord and emotional burnout. And they are more likely than older doctors to consider leaving the practice of medicine. That probably comes as a surprise to some who think older doctors are likely to be the most dissatisfied. Females also were found to have slightly lower morale than males and were more likely to walk away from medicine.

A few other demographic highlights:

- Doctors working in academic medicine experienced the highest rates of fatigue.
- Physicians employed by insurance companies reported the lowest rates of fatigue.
- Doctors in group practices, hospitals, and academic medicine had slightly lower morale than those working in government, insurance, or industry.

Are Doctors Partly to Blame?

Some survey respondents said it's not the health care system that's dragging doctors down. Physicians themselves are to blame.

Gregg Broffman, M.D., medical director at Lifetime Health Medical Group in Buffalo, New York, and president/CEO of TransitionConcepts, Ltd — a partnership of health care professionals dedicated to

facilitating change and transition management — said physicians need to face reality.

“It is long past time for physicians to look in the mirror and have a real heart-to-heart conversation with ourselves. Clinging to the notion of autonomy, ship captains, power, authority, etc. is a losing strategy. As German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once said, ‘Many are stubborn in pursuit of the path they have chosen, few in pursuit of the goal.’ ”

“If we accept the notion that the vast majority of us chose medicine for altruistic reasons, to help people, then we must realize that to do that in today's world, the path to that goal must be different than we expected it to be, and that in all likelihood the path will change continuously for the rest of our professional lives.”

“Once we embrace new ways, we can potentially regain our right to lead the change. Once we embrace the grieving process, understand it, and work our way through it, we will see a dramatic improvement in health care and our morale.”

Doctors' Advice

Despite the doom and gloom that many survey respondents expressed, some of the physicians were quick to diagnose the problems and offer some remedies.

“When I feel beaten, stressed, or burnt out, I remind myself that this is still the career of choice for me,” one doctor wrote. “I love the practice of medicine, and my patients, and the challenges. But I truly appreciate my family (husband and son, as well as siblings) and friends, and time away from the office... I am slowly allowing myself to spend more time at leisure... and scheduling time off.”

Another said setting limits is important.

“One of the major sources of stress seems to be more the pace and the amount of work and balancing that with our life outside of work. With technology available today, you can essentially have the ability to always be connected to your work responsibilities. I know of more physicians now finishing their

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MARKET WATCH

ACPE Physician Morale Survey Highlights

Please choose the single biggest factor that you believe lowers the morale of physicians working in U.S. health care.

	Response %	Response Total
Low Reimbursement Rates	21.9	263
Loss of Autonomy	21.2	254
Bureaucratic Red Tape	16.8	201
Patient Overload	12.1	145
Loss of Respect	11.8	142
Medical Malpractice Environment	10.5	126
Other	5.8	69
Total Respondents		1,200

Please indicate if you have personally experienced any of the problems below as a result of your work as a physician.

	Response %	Response Total
Fatigue	77.4	785
Emotional Burnout	66.7	676
Marital/Family Discord	34.2	347
Depression	32.2	327
Suicidal Thoughts	4.4	45
Substance Abuse	2.9	29
Other	9.4	95
Total Respondents		1,014

Source: American College of Physician Executives "Physician Morale Survey," 2006. For the full article and more study highlights, visit www.acpe.org/morale.

What's New at NEJM?

NEW SPECIALTIES ADDED FOR IN PRACTICE SPECIAL ISSUE!

Your ad will be mailed to almost 30,000 physicians in practice two and three years when you run a paid ad in the March 29 issue of NEJM. In addition to the primary care specialties and the internal medicine subspecialties from last year, this year's In Practice booklet will now also reach:

- Pediatric subspecialties (14)
- Surgical specialties (15)
- Critical care (3)

Call (800) 635-6991 or e-mail nejmads@nejm.org for a complete listing of all specialties.

**UPCOMING
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AND MEDICAL
CONVENTIONS**

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March 12–13, 2007
Hilton Head, SC
(804) 968-4436
www.usafp.org

**Association of Program
Directors in Internal
Medicine***
April 14–18, 2007
San Diego, CA
(800) 622-4558
www.apdim.med.edu

**American College
of Physicians***
April 19–21, 2007
San Diego, CA
(800) 523-1546, ext. 2544
www.acponline.org

Pri-Med Mid-West*
April 26–28, 2007
Rosemont, IL
(877) 4PRI-MED
www.pri-med.com

**National Association of
Physician Recruiters**
May 2–5, 2007
Orlando, FL
www.napr.org

**Association of American
Medical Colleges Physician
Workforce Meeting**
May 2–4, 2007
Bethesda, MA
www.aamc.org

*Call (800) 635-6991 for more details on FREE bonus convention distribution of your paid recruitment ad at these conventions in select cities.

PROMOTIONAL NOTES/NEWS

Reach Over 30,000 Final-Year Residents and Fellows for FREE with the March 1, 2007, Resident Reach Issue!*

Run a paid advertisement in the March 1 Resident Reach issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, and in addition to the 200,000 physicians that read NEJM regularly, you'll reach 30,000+ final-year residents and fellows in ALL specialties for FREE!*

Your ad will be reprinted in a special booklet and mailed to these job-seeking physicians, giving you the best access to the candidates. You can also connect to thousands of top physicians online, as your ad can also be posted to NEJM CareerCenter (nejmjobs.org).**

ISSUE	CLOSING DATE	SPECIALTIES
March 1	February 9	All — Over 100

NEW, Added E-mail Exposure!

And you'll receive additional exposure for your ad via e-mail, as NEJM will send a targeted e-mail message to physicians and direct them to our site where they can view your recruitment ad either on the searchable part of NEJM CareerCenter** or via a PDF of the Resident Reach booklet.

Physicians can search the jobs database, create CVs and cover letters, and apply to jobs electronically!

Contact us at (800) 635-6991 or nejmads@nejm.org to reserve your ad space for this issue and for complete promotional details.

**The recruitment section of the March 1 NEJM issue is reprinted and mailed to more than 30,000 final-year residents and fellows in all specialties whose address records appear in the AMA database. Counts are as of 12/4/06 and are subject to change based on data collected by the AMA.*

***Processing fees may apply to posting your ad to the searchable part of the website*

Survey Results (continued from page 2)

documentation and checking their e-mails at home after they have completed a long day of seeing patients. We need to make a conscious effort to “end the day” at some point and put as much effort into our personal lives and time.”

Source: Edited and reprinted with permission from the American College of Physician Executives (ACPE). “Physician Morale Study,” 2006, Bill Steiger. For the full article and more study highlights, visit www.acpe.org/morale.