



Physician well-being as a board priority

Physicians play a critical role in maintaining a successful hospital and health system. Since the governing board is ultimately responsible for an organization's quality of care, it has an important role to play to enhance and nurture a partnership with medical staff as they work together to advance their organization's mission.

Compassion fatigue and burnout

Recently we've heard from member leaders that their physicians and other care providers are experiencing "compassion fatigue." [Compassion fatigue](#) is a form of burnout from sustained employment-related stress that compromises an individual's desire to work. Secondary trauma can also result from the protracted exposure to the suffering of others.

Three components of burnout

- **Emotional exhaustion:** The experience of feeling overwhelmed, depleted and drained of emotional and physical energy.
- **Depersonalization:** A sense of disconnection from one's work, often manifesting as cynicism and a loss of empathy.
- **Reduced personal accomplishment:** Characterized by feelings of inefficacy, diminished competence and a perception of inadequate achievement.

Causes

Burnout tends to emerge from a range of industry-wide challenges, including:

- excessive workload;
- time pressure;
- administrative burdens;
- technology challenges;
- insufficient advanced practice providers;
- inadequate support staffing;
- workflow inefficiencies;
- organizational culture; and
- lack of control.

Prevalence

According to the [American Medical Association](#):

- burnout was highest after the pandemic in 2021 at 56%, then continuing on a [positive, downward trend](#);

- in 2023, 48.2% of physicians identified as having burnout;
- the first two quarters of 2024 were even lower at 45%.

Organizational impact

Physician well-being is critical to the strength and sustainability of a healthcare organization. Burnout poses significant risks, including:

- putting quality and patient safety at risk (increased medical errors, increased adverse outcomes, two times the risk of patient safety incidents, three times decrease in patient satisfaction);
- draining critical talent;
- creating a financial burden; and
- diminishing continuity of care.

These are all issues that fall within a board's responsibility. As stewards of the hospital's most vital assets, trustees hold a fiduciary responsibility to protect physicians and prioritize high standards of care.

Solutions

Healthcare boards and executive leaders must invest in practical, sustainable solutions that relieve the burden on physicians and promote systemic change. They must:

- tackle the root causes of burnout;
- plan in partnership with physicians;
- fix dysfunctional work environments;
- create a culture that embraces values and virtues like purpose, connectedness and gratitude;
- allow physicians to have greater control over their schedules; and
- expand team-based care by integrating more mid-level providers, hiring more administrative and support staff, protecting time off and streamlining documentation and administrative processes.

Addressing physician burnout must be a key board priority. By supporting physician well-being, the board is investing in the organization's most essential talent and in ensuring quality, safety, financial health and an exceptional patient experience.

Information for this article was obtained from:

- [Physician Burnout Demands Bold Action](#), AHA Trustee Services, © Used with permission of the American Hospital Association.
- [Compassion fatigue in healthcare providers: a scoping review](#), BMC Health Services Research.

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