

Ramping Up Efforts to Support Physician Health and Well-Being

Peer programs, educational efforts emphasize mental health as priority

By Jim Braibish, St. Louis Metropolitan Medicine

At several area health systems today, physicians can reach out confidentially to a specially trained fellow physician with issues of concern either personally or professionally. Or they can participate in group discussions around wellness issues.

These peer programs are among the ways that health systems and large practices are ramping up efforts to support physician mental health and well-being and reduce burnout. They also are measuring physician wellness and using the data to identify and change the greatest causes of stress and burnout.

Overall, these efforts are working to create a climate recognizing the importance of physician mental health and reduce the stigma around needing support.



Dr. Ray Weick

“Our number one goal is to reduce the sense of burnout or compassion fatigue in our physicians and advanced practitioners. We want to help create and foster an environment where physicians feel supported,” said Ray Weick, MD, regional physician executive for Mercy in the St. Louis area and physician wellness lead for the Mercy system covering Missouri, Arkansas, Kansas and Oklahoma. He is a family medicine physician. Mercy’s efforts are led by the Culture, Mission and Wellness Committee composed of physicians along with representatives of administration and operations.



Dr. Heather Schmidt

From SSM Health, Heather Schmidt, DO, family physician, adds: “We have been actively working to reduce stigma around seeking emotional support. We are making sure our providers are aware that mental health is a priority and that access to mental health resources is readily available.” Dr. Schmidt, of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, is SSM Health system medical director for employee well-being. SSM Health’s four-state territory encompasses Missouri as well as Wisconsin, Illinois and Oklahoma.

At St. Luke’s, nephrologist Thomas Pohlman, MD, chairman of the medical staff physician wellness committee, described



Dr. Thomas Pohlman

their efforts: “We have developed and implemented a number of programs focused on physician well-being, fostering supportive networks, and communication about how to access available wellness resources. However, we are quite cognizant and humbled by how much more there is to do in this realm.”

Dr. Pohlman described the need: “Many primary care physicians they feel an incredible loss of autonomy and are overwhelmed by the demands of the electronic health record, particularly the requirements for population health, and they are often treated as RVU generators. The industrialization of medicine, the creation of silos, the struggle for work-life balance, the depersonalization of medicine and moral injury—coupled with the demands of payers versus the needs of the patient—are creating challenges to the satisfaction of working in this great profession.”

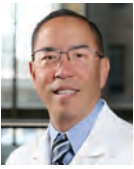
Originally formed in 2018, the St. Luke’s Physician Wellness Committee was written into the medical staff bylaws as a standing committee in 2023. It is composed of physicians and representatives of administration.



Peer-to-Peer Support

While Washington University School of Medicine originated its peer support program in 2014, the stress of COVID-19 led the university since 2020 to rejuvenate and grow its program, called the Clinician Support Team. Sixteen physicians and advance practice providers (APPs) are trained as peer supporters, along with 15 residents and fellows.

Emergency physician Douglas Char, MD, originally a volunteer with the program, became its medical director in 2020.



Dr. Douglas Char

He described the CST: “Our program is primarily geared to physicians and APPs who have had difficult or challenging clinical events or patient issues, as well as problems with workplace or career conflicts. We are a group of volunteer faculty just like you. We meet people where they are, striving to be active listeners, helping people get through the initial trauma and letting them know that they are not alone.”

The CST is completely independent and without any responsibility to human resources, risk management, the medical staff association, or medical school and health system administration. “We don’t keep notes or report back to anyone. Our focus is 100% on the impacted clinician.”

In assigning peers, the supporter typically is from a different department and specialty to avoid getting into any technical critique of the individual’s work. However, the peer is typically at a similar level of seniority and practice if possible.

Mercy this year has expanded its peer support program for physicians and advanced practice providers so there are 37 trained to provide support across the system. Physicians can self-refer to the program or be referred by others. This is independent of any disciplinary action.

“It might be the unexpected loss of a patient, or maybe something in one’s personal life such as a divorce, illness or caring for an elderly parent,” Dr. Weick said. “We offer them the opportunity to have a peer with whom to speak. The peer may be within their specialty or geographic region or not. We try to match the individual with an appropriate peer; so far it seems to have worked out quite well.”

Even if the individual declines peer support, “We still feel it’s a positive because the individual who has been referred knows there is someone who cares for them,” he added.

Dr. Weick has found serving as a peer support volunteer himself very rewarding. “I just want to let them know

I’m here for you. Not talking doctor to doctor, just human to human, friend to friend.”

He recalled two of his favorite success stories: “There was one colleague strongly considering leaving practice, who still is practicing today. Another was going through difficulties in his marriage but remains married and doing well today.”

At SSM Health, the peer support program is called Care for Caregivers. While previously in existence, it was stepped up in 2022. Care for Caregivers includes a steering team, referral coordinators and local trained peer supporters in each region.

“The literature shows that physicians will be more likely to reach out to a peer than to a professional,” Dr. Schmidt said. “We are building safe spaces to talk about the social and emotional aspects of working in health care.”

Also under the Care for Caregivers umbrella is Schwartz Rounds.¹ Advanced by the Schwartz Center for Compassionate Health Care and conceived by the late Boston health care attorney Kenneth Schwartz, Schwartz Rounds provide a structured forum where all staff, clinical and non-clinical, come together regularly to discuss the emotional and social aspects of working in health care.



Measuring Physician Wellness

Since 2020, Mercy has been partnering with the American Medical Association to use their survey tools to measure physician wellness.² The input gathered from the surveys has provided valuable guidance to address major causes of burnout.

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NATIONAL PHYSICIAN SUICIDE AWARENESS DAY SEPTEMBER 17

Highlighting the alarming rates of physician suicide and the need for greater support in the health care industry is National Physician Suicide Awareness Day, observed annually on September 17. This day seeks to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health issues among physicians and encourages open dialogue about these challenges within the medical community. For more information, visit npsaday.org. ◀



“Using this data-driven approach, we realized that the documentation burden is the number one concern for our primary care physicians. When you contrast that to our specialists, we find that their biggest concern is more support in the office, especially in terms of advanced practitioners.”

As a result, Mercy has begun utilizing voice recognition and other tools to help with charting. “We are seeing primary care physicians who utilize this resource spend an hour less per day documenting in the electronic health record.”

Another major finding: one of the groups that's most challenged with burnout is women in the middle of their careers. “So when we realized that shift in our data, we put together an A-team to address that and help educate our operations team and our clinical team to understand some of those unique challenges. As we started to shed light and awareness on this work, we then were able to note the following year that we did in fact see a significant improvement among women physicians.”

The data indicate these efforts are making a difference. From 2020 to 2023, the number of Mercy physicians and APPs noting they felt stressed on the job decreased from 56.7% to 47.0%. Job satisfaction grew from 69.2% to 72.6%.

SSM Health utilizes tools in Epic to monitor physician usage patterns that impact burnout. “Epic gives us objective data on how our providers are using the medical record. That allows us to think more systematically about things that can be done differently to decrease work burden,” Dr. Schmidt said.

Using Epic data overcomes any bias inherent in surveys that don't reflect the input of non-responders, she noted. “We encourage our leaders to use this data only as a starting point for a conversation. The most meaningful part of having data is the conversation that follows and the opportunity to work together to improve work stressors.”

REAUTHORIZATION AND FUNDING SOUGHT FOR LORNA BREEN ACT

Congress currently is considering reauthorization and expanded funding for the Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act. Originally passed in 2022, this legislation has funded \$103 million toward strategies that reduce and prevent suicide, burnout, mental health conditions, and substance use disorders. The act is named for Lorna Breen, MD, a New York emergency physician who died by suicide in April 2020. For more information, visit drlornabreen.org/reauthorizelba. ◀

St. Luke's makes available the Mayo Clinic Well-Being Index³ on its Physicians Hub intranet site. Dr. Pohlman said he would like to expand measurement efforts.



Presentations and Group Discussions

Esse Health has several initiatives prioritizing wellness for its more than 100 physicians and other providers, according to Rishi Sud, MD, MBA, chief medical officer. These include regular workshops and seminars; peer support groups; flexible scheduling; confidential counseling for managing stress and anxiety; and continuous learning opportunities.

St. Luke's offers “Doctors' Night Out” events, giving physicians the opportunity to meet off campus in a social environment, where they can break down institutional silos and develop collegial support networks. Recently added is “Coffee with Colleagues,” a monthly event series held in various locations that enable small groups of physicians to meet and exchange ideas. A women in medicine committee has been set up to develop initiatives supporting the unique challenges faced by women physicians.

Mercy has a speaker series on wellness topics that physicians and APPs throughout the system can attend in person or virtually. In October 2023, Mercy brought to St. Louis nationally renowned physician wellness expert Tait Shanafelt, MD, of Stanford University School of Medicine.

SSM Health also offers speakers system-wide virtually and in person. Leadership is an important topic. “We are developing all of our leaders to have a wellness-focused lens as well as developing physician leaders to support our teams in a comprehensive way,” Dr. Schmidt said.

Key to wellness efforts succeeding, she noted: “We need to be transparent and build trust and communication. ... How do we talk to each other and listen to each other so we can deliver excellent health care?”

Dr. Char from Washington University emphasized the systemic causes of burnout: “If we don't address the systems issues, we may make small dents, but we're not going to create a culture where physicians and other clinicians feel supported and valued.” ◀

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