



INSIGHTS FROM THE BDO CENTER FOR HEALTHCARE EXCELLENCE & INNOVATION

# PREVENTING PHYSICIAN MORAL INJURY IN HEALTHCARE

As the pandemic continues to take its toll on our healthcare system, it's imperative that we acknowledge the mental health needs of a critical, yet sometimes overlooked, sect of the population: clinicians. Physician burnout was a challenge in the healthcare industry even before the pandemic, and COVID-19 has only exacerbated that problem.

Frontline workers are so focused on their patients that they sometimes neglect their own mental health needs, fail to take advantage of the resources available to them, and/or try to manage their situations themselves. There comes a point when clinicians are unable to provide high-quality care and healing due to their own possible impairment. This concept is known as **physician moral injury**, and there are ways hospital leaders can identify, address, and prevent it in their healthcare organizations.

### ADJUSTING HIRING PRACTICES



Hiring practices in place before 2020 were already limiting the healthcare workforce and the pandemic exacerbated the problem by pushing more people to exit the healthcare industry. There are now fewer people working in healthcare than prior to the pandemic. At the same time, an aging healthcare workforce, insufficient succession planning and lower medical school graduation rates have all contributed to the problem. As a result, people are looking into alternative career options like cosmetic work or private practice where they can set their own hours and encounter a less stressful environment. This puts even greater pressure on healthcare organizations to hire more staff.

One way providers can address burnout is by shifting their care model to one that places physicians in an oversight role supervising advanced practice providers. We expect to see an acceleration in the hiring of these providers to work more closely with primary care physicians. If balanced correctly, the result should be both a reduction in the burden on physician practitioners and a lower cost model of care.

### SUPPORT THOSE WHO SUPPORT CLINICIANS



**Clinicians can't do their jobs without a support team around them.** There are fewer people working on all facets of running healthcare organizations, including those in administrative and facility maintenance roles, and organizations are encountering challenges in backfilling these roles. When it comes to the mental health conversation, non-clinician workers are often overlooked. But their support is critical to creating an environment in which clinicians can do their jobs. It's crucial that they're included in the conversation and their needs are also met.

The wear and tear on healthcare providers in various roles ultimately trickles down to patient care. Patient experience survey results are suffering, physician trust is declining, and there's been an overall erosion in the primary care-patient relationship. If patients are unsatisfied with their level of care, they'll go elsewhere, regardless of knowing if they will find a better option. But that doesn't solve the issue of burnout among hospital staff. Mental health resources are largely left up to an individual employee to seek help, and program availability is not widely known beyond physician offerings. Considering the stigma attached to behavioral health issues, it is unrealistic to expect employees to proactively reach out to their colleagues, so instead, employers — healthcare organizations — need to be more proactive in treating this type of moral injury among their staff.





## AUTOMATE, INNOVATE, EVALUATE



**Technology solutions are trending for hospitals responding to the issues of physician moral injury and employee burnout.** There are a great number of tech initiatives, but the plans and strategies that accompany them need to be well thought out to be effective.

For example, the administrative burden on both patients and healthcare workers is undeniable, but progress can be made with a few key tactics. Digitizing medical records, automating form-fills, and upgrading scheduling software can increase accessibility for patients and allow clinicians to spend more facetime with their patients. The human element of healthcare cannot be automated; even telehealth relies on human interaction to be successful. The goal for healthcare organizations should be to develop efficiencies through technology solutions that are not cost-prohibitive and preserve and increase the time clinicians spend with their patients, while also reducing administrative burdens to lessen the load on support staff as well.

## TREAT THE CAUSE, NOT THE SYMPTOM



**Physician moral injury and employee burnout among hospital and practice staff are a serious threat to the stability of the healthcare industry.** But hope is not lost: the pandemic has created an interest in younger generations to give back through careers in medicine. Medical school applications are once again on the rise and the stigma around mental health is continuing to be addressed. Now, it's up to healthcare organizations to take the right steps to care for the holistic health of their employees beyond just the physical. Frontline workers have been celebrated more for their work during the pandemic, but it's important that they not only feel appreciated, but also protected.

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