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Bucking Burnout: Cultivating Resilience in Today's Physicians

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—By Barbara A. Gabriel, special to the Reporter

Burnout—a state of physical and mental exhaustion combined with self-doubt about professional competence—is a well-known phenomenon in today's workplace. But a growing body of research is showing that physicians are more prone to burnout than those in other professions.

According to a 2011 study published in the *Journal of Internal Medicine*, burnout affects an estimated 25 to 60 percent of all physicians. In addition, a study recently published in *Academic Medicine* found that approximately 15 to 20 percent of physicians will have mental health problems at some point in their careers.

This lack of resilience can harm a career in academic medicine, according to Ronald Epstein, M.D., professor of family medicine, psychiatry, oncology, and nursing at the University of Rochester Medical Center. "Grants are hard to get, things are fiercely competitive, and there are many more stressors today than there were 30 years ago," he said. "Even to get a toehold in academic medicine, one needs a certain amount of resilience."

Wayne Sotile, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and assistant professor at Tulane University Medical School who has counseled thousands of physicians, said that "resilience wear-down" can be an unavoidable part of the journey in academic medicine. "Physicians can be exquisitely capable of denying themselves," said Sotile, who wrote *The Resilient Physician* in 2002. "They deny their anxieties, their fears, their fatigue, their wants. They go numb, but keep on going." Resilient physicians "find meaning and purpose in their work," he added. "Meaning is the antidote to burnout."

Epstein defines resilience as "the ability of an individual to respond to stress in a healthy, adaptive way, such that personal and professional goals are achieved at minimal psychological and physical cost." Resilient physicians are capable of bouncing back rapidly after challenges, and they grow stronger in the process, he noted.

Amit Sood, M.D., director of research and practice in the Complementary and Integrative Medicine Program at the Mayo Clinic and an associate professor of medicine at the Mayo Clinic College of Medicine, agreed. "Resilient physicians feel they are an important part of society and they are impacting people's lives. They live their lives guided by higher meaning and purpose."

As mounting research shows that physicians are in danger of burning out, compromising their abilities, or leaving academic medicine altogether, medical schools and teaching hospitals are starting to pay attention to the importance of cultivating resilience among their faculty.

"Lack of resilience predisposes you to burnout," Sood said. "It increases your predisposition toward stress, which causes you to go into a deeper hole. You feel like what you are doing is not worthwhile, and you have a sense of disengagement toward your work."

Sood believes that in part, academic medicine physicians might be more prone to burnout than their colleagues in private practice because academics wear more hats. "They have a lot of open files in their heads," he said. "If I am a researcher and a physician, and involved in education, and a dad and a husband, that creates a lot of open files and potentially a lot of unresolved issues."

Sotile added that academic physicians are at particular risk because of factors that are especially toxic to one's sense of well-being. "The work settings are highly demanding," he said. "In addition, the physicians have a low sense of control and don't have the support they need. It's a formula for diminished resilience." Other professions, he noted, develop more "emotional intelligence" among their employees. "They develop a capacity for engagement, for seeking and providing support. The culture of medicine is far from that."

Teaching resilience

In response to the problem, a number of medical schools and teaching hospitals are exploring the possibility of teaching resilience to their physicians. At Rochester, Epstein has been instrumental in developing courses and seminars that teach "mindful practice," which aims to cultivate self-awareness and resilience. The students' exercises include practicing meditation, writing stories about challenging

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situations, and interviewing one another about difficult choices they have had to make.

"Through a combination of these self-awareness, self-monitoring, narrative, and contemplative exercises, people seem to acquire a better ability to respond to stress in the moment," said Epstein. "We've studied this and have measured burnout before and after these interventions, and it seems to make a difference."

Since 2007, Rochester's School of Medicine and Dentistry has had mindful practice seminars as part of the required courses in its third-year medical curriculum and several residency programs. Epstein has developed additional programs for practicing physicians and multiday workshops for clinicians and educators. He believes that resilience can be taught, but only to the extent students want to learn it. "We can lead people to learn ways to enhance their own resilience, but obviously we can't make them," he said.

Documenting improvements

Sood has documented the success of his Stress Management and Resiliency Training (SMART) program. He has shown statistically significant improvements in physicians' resilience, stress, anxiety, and overall quality of life. "We have completed eight clinical trials, and in almost all of [them], we were able to increase people's resilience based on standard validating skills," he said.

SMART first helps participants identify their personal and professional challenges. Then they learn how stress affects the brain.

"We help people understand why they are experiencing stress, why their brain is creating this stress response," Sood said. Recognizing this goes a long way toward changing behavior.

"It's a bit like when you are driving and see a sign that displays your speed. You automatically slow down. You don't realize how fast you're going," Sood said. "We've treated about 1,500 people in four years, and universally people say, 'I had no idea I was doing this to myself.'" Once his students recognize the role that stress is playing in their lives, they can learn the skills to deal with it in a healthy manner.

Such a proactive approach to promoting resilience is desperately needed, added Sotile. "Attending to physician resilience needs to be elevated from the 'soft' side to a strategic initiative that is a human resources crisis nationally. We need to utilize organizational resources to truly facilitate resilience in physicians from training through retirement."