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U.S.

Physician Burnout Widespread, Especially Among Those Midcareer, Report Says

About half of all doctors surveyed said they would be willing to take a substantial pay cut to achieve a better work-life balance



Overall, 42% of the physicians surveyed across 29 specialties reported feeling some sense of burnout. PHOTO: PHILIP MONTGOMERY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Brianna Abbott

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Physicians between the ages of 40 and 54 experience a higher rate of burnout than younger or older physicians, according to a recent survey of more than 15,000

physicians who cited administrative tasks and work hours as key drivers of their stress.

Nearly half of Generation X physicians reported feeling burned out, compared with 38% of millennials, ages 25 to 39, and 39% of baby boomers, ages 55 to 73, surveyed. Roughly half of all the doctors surveyed also said that they would be willing to take a substantial pay cut to achieve a better work-life balance.

Burnout is often described as long-term, unresolved, work-related stress that leads to cynicism, detachment, exhaustion and lack of a sense of personal accomplishment. Rates of burnout are particularly high among health professionals, such as doctors and nurses, and studies have linked burnout to decreased quality of care and patient satisfaction.

Overall, 42% of the physicians surveyed across 29 specialties reported feeling some sense of burnout, down slightly from 46% in 2015. The report, published on Wednesday by medical-information platform Medscape, breaks down the generational differences in burnout and how doctors cope with the symptoms that are widespread throughout the profession.

“There are a lot more similarities than differences, and what that highlights is that burnout in medicine right now is really an entire profession problem,” said Colin West, a professor of medicine at the Mayo Clinic who researches physician well-being.

“There’s really no age group, career stage, gender or specialty that’s immune from these issues.”

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In recent years, hospitals, health systems and advocacy groups have tried to curb the problem by starting wellness programs, hiring chief wellness officers or attempting to reduce administrative tasks for nurses and physicians.

Still, high rates of burnout persist among the medical community, from medical-school students to seasoned professionals, and more than two-thirds of all physicians surveyed in the Medscape report said that burnout had an impact on their personal relationships. Nearly one in five physicians also reported that they are depressed, with the highest rate, 18%, reported by Gen Xers.

The stage of a doctor's career might account for much of the age-related differences, rather than something inherently generational, say researchers who study physician well-being. Generation X doctors are at a pivotal point in their professional and personal lives, and the heightened pressures or desire for a career shift might contribute to their increased levels of burnout. They are simultaneously up for promotions at work or figuring out the next step in their career path, as well as potentially raising children at home or caring for older parents, all while continuing to practice medicine.

"The Gen Xers are in the prime of their professional careers, at their busiest and perhaps most stressed point, and perhaps with more family competing pressures than younger physicians," said Gary Price, the president of the Physicians Foundation, a nonprofit group that advocates for physicians.

Women physicians, who make up a greater portion of the younger generations, also face higher rates of burnout. Though the exact reason for the disparity isn't clear, several societal factors, including time spent on domestic responsibilities, discrimination and harassment, likely play a role, says Dr. West.

Some 55% of physicians reported that administrative tasks as the main driver of burnout, and spending too many hours at work was also a top contributor across the board. But millennial and Gen X doctors cited also a lack of respect from

administrators, employers or colleagues as a top concern, while boomers highlighted increased computerization and electronic medical records.

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The boomers “were the ones that saw the big change from paper charts,” said Leslie Kane, the senior director of Medscape’s Business of Medicine site. Because of the shift

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to electronic health records, doctors often note spending less time communicating with patients, a change that boomers would also notice more acutely, she said.

But while millennials are more satisfied with electronic medical records than previous generations, most of them are still dissatisfied with the system, said Tait Shanafelt, chief wellness officer at Stanford Medicine and director of its WellMD Center. “That group, as much as anyone, says, ‘Why can’t this be like my

iPhone?’” said Dr. Shanafelt. “I think they navigate it better, but they still recognize its inefficiencies.”

The majority of millennial doctors said that they coped by sleeping or talking with family members and friends, but the top two responses from Gen X or boomers were exercise and isolating themselves from others.

Write to Brianna Abbott at brianna.abbott@wsj.com

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