



2017 Physician and Advanced Practitioner Burnout Survey Reveals Key Drivers of Physician Wellness and Retention

A 2017 survey by Cejka Search and VITAL WorkLife of 555 physicians and advanced practitioners found that stress levels among physicians remain alarmingly high, with 85.1 percent reporting moderate to severe stress levels.

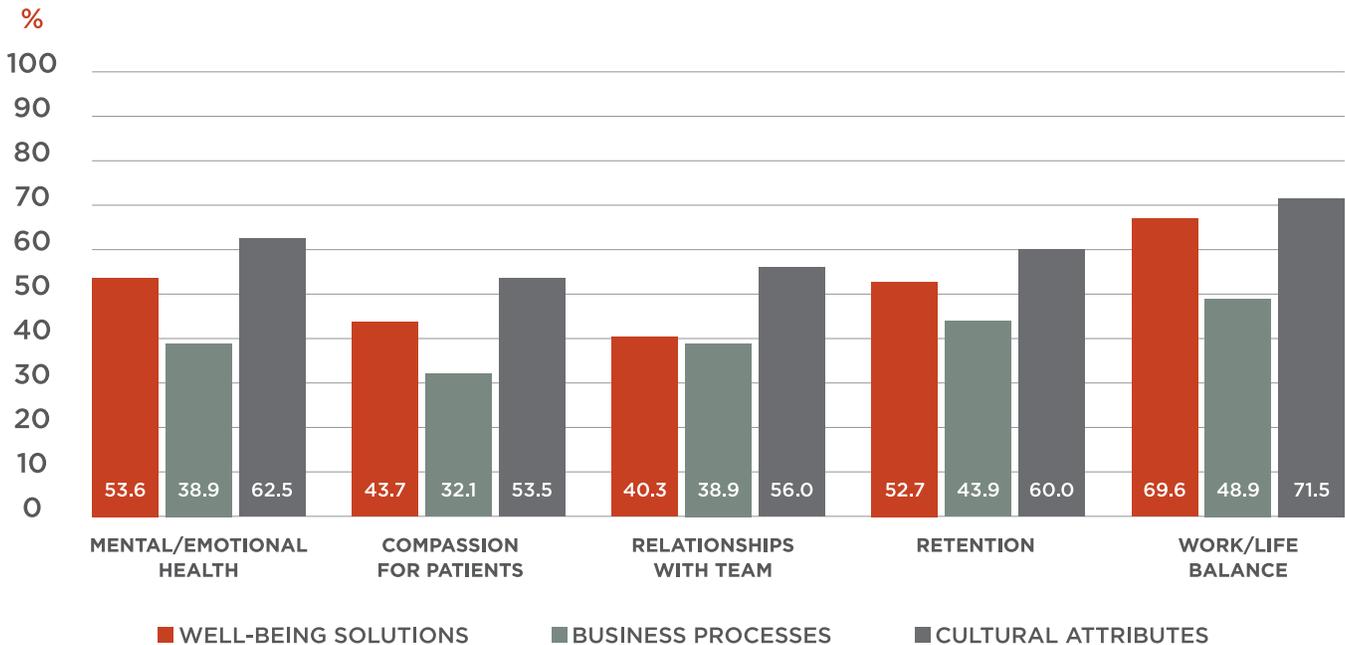
High stress and burnout in physicians has been widely reported to correlate with higher risk for medical errors, reduced work hours, substance abuse and increased thoughts of suicide. The additional risks for healthcare organizations include — reduced patient safety, lower staff morale and increased turnover and recruitment challenges¹ — all issues healthcare organizations under margin pressures can ill afford.

■ Organizational Culture: Greatest Factor in Clinician Wellness and Retention

The survey also examined physician and advanced practitioner wellness solutions and barriers within three broad categories: self-care solutions; cultural attributes; and business process and quality advancement strategies.

While all categories were valued by respondents, cultural attributes emerged as the greatest factor across all wellness measures. For instance, clinicians reported cultural attributes as “extremely important” to the desire to stay in one’s current job (60 percent), mental or emotional health (62.5 percent), and work/life balance (71.5 percent). A majority also viewed culture as extremely important to their compassion for patients (53.5 percent) and relationships with care team members (56.0 percent).

PHYSICIANS AND ADVANCED PRACTITIONERS REPORTING AS “EXTREMELY IMPORTANT”



These are each significant matters, especially when you consider the following facts:

- The U.S. physician shortage is expected to reach between 34,600 and 88,000 in 2025,¹ making the retention, preservation of health and optimal use of the nation’s physician resources critical.
- Physician vacancies are costly, estimated at \$1 million² per year, per primary care physician (PCP), and higher for many specialties.
- The physician recruitment market is competitive, with less than one job-seeking physician available for every PCP job opening in the nation.³
- Clinicians’ interaction and influence on a positive patient experience can significantly impact reimbursements, provider ratings and reputation, and patient retention and attraction.
- The ability to operate as part of an efficient and effective care team is critical to working successfully within the constructs of risk-based and newer reimbursement models that require greater continuity and coordination of care.

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■ Organizational Culture: Greatest Factor in Clinician Wellness and Retention, cont'd.

A deeper analysis of the data reveals that culture and leadership are intertwined. For example, concerning cultural attributes, physicians and advanced practitioners most valued skilled leadership (84.3 percent) that demonstrates awareness or concern for their needs (87.8 percent) and creates an environment where team members are collaborative (88.8 percent) and employees are held accountable (86.5 percent). Even within the category of business processes that advance quality, the themes of strong leadership and team collaboration were reiterated, along with effective staffing ratios.

“The key takeaway, in my opinion, is physicians remain at high risk for burnout, and in one of the most competitive physician recruitment markets in history, replacing burned-out doctors can be a significant challenge for healthcare providers.”

— Don Weis, Senior Vice President, Cejka Search

■ Significant barriers to well-being solutions

Well-being solutions ranked close behind culture as a factor in work/life balance, mental/emotional health and retention. However, a large majority of physicians and advanced practitioners (87.6 percent) reported at least one barrier to accessing these solutions and more than half (55.7 percent) reported six or more barriers. These include awareness of the programs, time to use what is available, access to solutions, unresponsive management and the stigma associated with asking for help.

There are also reported gaps between what is being offered and what clinicians most value. Physicians and advanced practitioners most value financial remuneration for non-clinical tasks, a reduced workload or schedule, and EMR/EHR assistance. Whereas, organizations most commonly offer individual counseling, peer mentoring and professional coaching.

■ Business processes that advance quality

Business processes and quality advancement strategies were comparatively less impactful across all wellness factors.

The key finding within this category is that organizations' most common offerings are formal, regulatory-focused education, in contrast to the more pragmatic solutions most valued by physicians and advanced practitioners. These include strong leadership, effective staffing ratios, efficient work teams, and team-based care training and support.

■ Rising pressures on physicians and advanced practitioners

With continued healthcare legislation, technology integration, increasing demand for services and fewer resources on the horizon, the challenge of physician and advanced practitioner stress and burnout will persist. As the healthcare community has already begun to recognize in the promotion of the quadruple aim (which now includes the goal of improving provider health in addition to cost, quality, and patient health), physician and advanced practitioner health is critical to achieving adequate access to services and quality of care. It is also critical to improving organizational performance in a cost-constrained environment.

■ The best way to ensure clinician wellness and retention is to hire for cultural fit

The first step in retention is ensuring the right cultural fit from the point of hire. To do so, organizations must have internal clarity on the role and requirements, use behavioral interviewing, interview in a variety of settings including social and informal, and conduct thorough reference checks. It's also important to remember that physicians today have their choice of employers, and they are screening potential employers for cultural fit as much as the organization is.

"Healthcare organizations need to recognize that they are competing for physician talent," said Vivian Luce, Senior Vice President, Cejka Search. "To secure top choice hires, employers must have a plan for making a great impression during the interview process, be decisive and efficient once they find a physician they like and be flexible in designing a total employment offer that meets the needs of the individual as well as the organization."

Once on board, search experts recommend assigning a peer as a "mentor" and a person to whom questions can be directed to help with the assimilation. Create a support structure not only for the physician but also for relocating family members.

On a long-term basis, the 2016 Cejka Search Healthcare Perspectives Study of nearly 700 physicians revealed a strong desire to have a voice in how physicians' time is structured, and a say in the policies and practices of the organization. In short, physicians want a "seat at the table," which employers can address in the following ways:

1. Establishing physician representation on boards and committees
2. Gathering input from physicians on major initiatives, including:
 - Technology requirements
 - Quality metrics
 - Value-based compensation and incentives
 - Care-transition/care-team planning
 - Financial improvement measures
 - Workflow planning
3. Selecting physicians who can serve as effective "mission" ambassadors by gathering and delivering information pertinent to organizational goal alignment.
4. Aligning compensation and other incentives with team/unit goals as well as organizational goals.
5. Clear, frequent communication with physicians on organization's goals and initiatives, including the financial and medical evidence behind each.

Physicians want to be engaged as partners in tackling the challenges facing healthcare today. The more involved they are in setting the organization's agenda and policies, and the more data they receive to support the organization's decisions the more supportive and satisfied they will be.

■ Case study: Sentara Medical Group

Cultural Transformation: Where to Begin

Leadership philosophy

Dr. Robert “Doug” Culling, DO, MS, CPE joined Sentara Medical Group (SMG) in late 2014 as President and Corporate Vice President of Sentara Healthcare. SMG is an 800+ provider multi-specialty medical group based in Norfolk, VA with about 3,000 employees. His prior leadership experience had convinced him that many healthcare organizations, under pressure from sweeping reform, tend to introduce individual initiatives targeted at improving specific scores or reducing individual inefficiencies. But without fully engaged employees, most of these efforts fall short of the transformational changes required to stay ahead of the industry curve.

Business goal

Dr. Culling’s goal was to create an incredible SMG patient experience, based on the belief that happy, engaged employees are the key to high service quality and exceptional patient experiences, and exceptional patient care is the key to improved financial performance.

Results following one year in practice

Although transforming a culture is a lengthy and ongoing process, SMG’s results after just one year’s progress are impressive, including:

- Lowest first-year turnover of any group in the integrated health system (excluding Sentara Corporate)
- Increased employee satisfaction and engagement results
- Improved patient satisfaction scores, including six percentage points for urgent care and three percentage points for adults and pediatrics
- Medical group end-of-year performance goal was exceeded for the first time in its history

The first four steps in the culture transformation journey at SMG

1. Start with the data

- The patient satisfaction survey program was overhauled to yield more reliable, actionable data. The survey was reduced from 52 questions to just nine, focused on patient experience and provider behavior. The data collection tool was changed from pen and paper to one that uses email, text messages and phone calls to solicit feedback promptly after patient visits. As a result, participation rose from 30 to 250 completed surveys per provider per month, improving the validity of the data. Lag time improved from six months to several days after a visit, improving the accuracy of the feedback.
- The organization also conducted a culture inventory of its 3,000 employees to capture the most common behaviors exhibited and identify areas for improvement.
- To round out the above data and to begin to establish open lines of communication, Dr. Culling participated in listening-and-learning sessions with providers and advanced care practitioners from all regions of the organization.

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■ Case study: Sentara Medical Group, cont'd.

2. Clearly communicate where the organization is, and where it is going

- The leadership team helped craft the organization's vision and priorities and communicated these to all employees.
- Dr. Culling's direct reports began to emulate his style of listening and learning through frequent leadership rounding with front-line employees and clinicians to proactively partner in problem-solving.
- Leaders also participated in defining Core Service Quality Standards, which are distinct and separate from clinical standards. These are the standards that establish the non-negotiable service behaviors expected by all staff members, such as the time within which phone and email inquiries are responded to, the guidelines around greeting patients and guests, and standards for walking visitors to the unit or department they are looking for.

3. Establish the right talent, roles and forums for collaboration

For SMG, this included:

- Introducing a Leaders Pace of Work program for better management of overwhelming priorities and pace of work to reduce staff burnout.
- Creating a new Patient Experience Director position to help drive focus on a patient experience-centered culture, in addition to the existing human resources roles and function
- Revising the selection process for employee hiring to include traits that support the desired culture, such as being innovative, able to make decisions and open to new ideas
- Forming Practice Support Teams that work together on workflow practices and executing and habituating new initiatives
- Establishing collaboration forums for physician and business leaders, as well as healthcare career veterans and leaders from industries outside of healthcare for a fresh perspective

4. Deliver training and recognition to support evolving expectations

A continuously evolving initiative, some of the early training and recognition programs at SMG included:

- Introducing off-site, simulated patient communication and empathy training required for all providers and their staff. In year one, 95 percent training completion goals were met, and the program became the standard for all new hires going forward.
- Establishing new orientation, onboarding and mentoring programs for providers and staff members.
- Creating a rewards program that recognizes behaviors and results that support the SMG values in the key areas of patient experience, process improvement, practice optimization, teamwork, and safety.

■ Survey sponsors

- **Cejka Search** (CejkaSearch.com) has provided physician, healthcare executive, and advanced practice search services to the healthcare industry for more than 35 years. Through its team of experienced professionals, award-winning recruitment technology and ongoing research on industry trends, Cejka Search expertly places top healthcare talent with healthcare organizations nationwide.
- **VITAL WorkLife** (VITALWorkLife.com) uses its comprehensive programs, such as Physician Interventions and Physician Wellness Resources, to address emotional and behavioral issues concerning individuals and their organizations. These programs effectively address well-being through peer coaching, in-the-moment counseling, and ongoing, preventative support programs to build sustainable, healthy behaviors.

Sources:

1. Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC)
2. Journal of the Association of Staff Physician Recruiters;
3. Analysis of data from Wanted Analytics, June 2016, and Kaiser Family Foundation/Redi-Data, January 2016

■ **For more detailed survey results, click here.**