

REPORTS

'If we start getting paid for patient satisfaction and quality and we don't proactively get out there and lower stress and prevent burnout for our physicians, we're shooting ourselves in the foot.'

When stress spirals into burnout

By MARCIA FRELICK



Family physician Rich Krebs, MD, knew he had to make a professional change. He had graduated from medical school in 1970, where he found what he loved: Spending time with patients, interacting with families.

BUT BY THE 1990s, HE SAID, PAPERWORK was gobbling up way too much of his time in his small practice in Bellingham. Reimbursements were getting smaller, overhead was getting larger. The only way to survive seemed to be to see more patients faster.

As he tried to keep up, his work days grew to 16 hours. He had suicidal feelings and “just wanted those feelings to be over,” he said. “But admitting that to my colleagues or spouse was a very difficult thing to do.”

In 1997, he decided to give up his practice. He didn't know what was next: “I just knew I had to stop.” He took six months off and then decided to switch to a career where he could stay in medicine, but better control his hours and workload. He started assisting in surgeries at St. Joseph's Hospital in Bellingham and worked in a university student health clinic. Now, at age 67, he assists two or six hours, three to five days a week.

Dr. Krebs found balance after burnout by reading and talking with other physicians, because he wasn't aware of any local options for help at the time. Others deal with burnout in myriad ways. Some regain their footing and manage to remain in their jobs; others leave medicine altogether. And some keep working, thinking they can't change things.

While stress and burnout have been long-standing problems in the profession, pressures are mounting, said Charles Meredith, MD, medical director of the Washington Physicians Health Program. The program, www.wphp.org, which is under contract with the state Department of Health, helps physicians with conditions such as burnout and assists in their recovery and return to work.

“There's an expectation and demand for increased access to care,” he said. “Most of the physicians I work with say they're being asked to do more, get paid less, see their families less and meet higher expectations.”

Electronic medical records, which in theory are supposed to help physicians in

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Peer review workshop at annual meeting

THE NEXT MEDICAL Staff Leaders Peer Review Workshop will take place prior to the WSMA annual meeting in Seattle on Sept 19. This course will cover the fundamentals of peer review and peer review best practices. Visit the annual meeting webpage for more information about the important workshop at www.wsma.org/annual-meeting. ●

of Washington School of Medicine admissions committee.

It's been interesting over the years to observe the evolution of physicians, she says. "They practice in a more collaborative way these days, and they tend to talk in terms of teamwork and work much more as teams," she says. "I think the quality of physicians is as good as ever, and the public still regards physicians favorably."

Since she began writing about health care and medicine more than 30 years ago, "cost, cost, cost" has been a persistent topic, she says. "For a long time, many physicians felt 'It's not my problem.' But as more and more Americans had to go without insurance because of its ever-increasing cost, that changed. Many physicians now understand that you can provide high-quality care and not break the bank. But health care is still amazingly expensive."

One of the WSMA Reports she's most proud of was a cover story about physicians who were addicted to alcohol or drugs, either prescription or illegal, who had sought treatment through the Washington Physicians Health Program that was started by the WSMA in the 1970s. "Addiction is a topic that was—and still is—cloaked in a lot of stigma. I interviewed two physicians with life-threatening addictions. I talked to each for several hours, and their stories were heartbreaking. The piece ended up being published all over the place."

When her schedule clears after her retirement, Jean plans on continuing her work in both her home garden—she and her husband have a large yard at her Laurelhurst house—and as a master gardener and as a board member of the Friends of Yesler Swamp, a nearby environmental restoration project. Otherwise? "I'm also a pianist," she offers. "I take photos, play tennis and play golf. I read widely, both fiction and non-fiction. I'm very interested in politics."

WSMA Executive Director and CEO

Jennifer Hanscom says she will sorely miss Jean's presence at the organization.

"Jean is an extremely skillful writer and editor," Jennifer says. "WSMA Reports is more than just a membership newsletter. Our goal, particularly with our cover story, is to serve as an impartial and credible source of information on medicine in Washington state. We don't want to publish news that you pick up in the local press. Jean understood this and skillfully put together a publication that provides our membership with information relevant to the profession throughout our state. She always looked at the issues and topics through the eyes of our members."

"Jean is and was the wizard behind WSMA Reports. She was essential to our association. She will be greatly missed." ●

Discount prescription drugs for your patients

WSMASMA HAS TEAMED up with the Washington Drug Card to help physicians provide discount prescription drug cards to patients and employees. Washington Drug Card is a statewide prescription assistance program that offers discount drug cards to all state residents. The cards can be used for savings of up to 75 percent at more than 56,000 regional and national pharmacies. The cards themselves are free, and there are no membership restrictions, no income requirements, no age limitations and no applications to complete.

Have a supply of Washington Drug Cards mailed to your clinic by contacting Eric Brown at eric.brown@washingtondrugcard.com or (206) 755-6971, or encourage your patients to print a free card at www.washingtondrugcard.com. ●