

# Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine

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#### Quote of the Month

"Physicians are extremely dedicated to providing quality care to their patients but they often do so at their own expense...[we] must appreciate and support physicians in their efforts to protect and maintain their personal well-being."

**Wallace JE & Lemaire J**

### Provider Well-Being and the "Conspiracy of Silence"

Much is being written currently about the well-being of physicians and other health care providers. In particular, some feel that physician "burnout" has reached sufficiently high levels that it should be considered a public health issue. Health care organizations are approaching this issue in a variety of ways, with emphasis on a "diagnose and treat" model leading to programs that offer support to clinical care providers.

Why are more and more providers, especially physicians, reporting symptoms of burnout? And why is this issue so important? These are complex questions. In a fascinating qualitative study, Wallace and Lemaire<sup>1</sup> conducted focus group interviews with 42 physicians across a spectrum of medical specialties, in an attempt to explore the possible links between well-being and quality of care. Two broad themes emerged: the culture of medicine and physician workload. Participants in the study reported a variety of reasons for their reluctance to acknowledge their own feelings of stress:

- The process of physician training
- A strong sense of commitment to their patients
- External pressures to see more and more patients
- A fear of talking with colleagues about their own vulnerabilities or the possible difficulties being experienced by a colleague (i.e., the conspiracy of silence)

When asked whether they felt that most doctors make a connection between their own well-being and the care they provide to patients, 45% of study participants "do not think most doctors are aware of" the link between patient care and personal wellness. Another 32% felt that doctors are aware of the link at some level, but "are not consciously aware of it on a daily basis nor as it applies to them." The authors also noted that these findings were consistent with an earlier study<sup>2</sup> wherein physicians reported that they feel compelled to appear well at all times, because "they believe their health is viewed by patients as a reflection of their own competence."

At VTCSOM and Carilion Clinic, there are efforts underway to examine this issue formally and think further about potential ways we can support the wellness of all of our clinical care providers. A Provider Wellness Advisory Committee (chaired by Dr. Mark Greenawald) is actively seeking input from a spectrum of colleagues who recognize that this issue is a formidable one. Specifically, **be watching for a survey from Dr. Greenawald and Dr. Lauren Penwell-Waines** in the next few weeks on this topic and please take the time to complete it; the resulting data will likely offer valuable insights into how we can continue supporting provider wellness. Let's hope the "conspiracy of silence" eventually becomes a "cascade of communication" on this vitally important topic!

David Musick, PhD

<sup>1</sup>Wallace JE, Lemaire J. Physician Well Being and the Quality of Patient Care: An Exploratory Study of the Missing Link. *Psychology, Health and Medicine* 2009; 14 (5): 545-52.

<sup>2</sup>Thompson WT et al. Challenge of Culture, Conscience and Contract to General Practitioners' Care of their Own Health: Qualitative Study. *British Medical Journal* 2001; 323: 728-32.