

PHYSICIAN WELLNESS

Issue 2



Medical Student Update

Advocacy: An Unanticipated Antidote for Burnout

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When we sat down in the spring of 2018 to create the Nebraska Health Policy Network (HPN) with fellow UNMC medical student Olivia Sonderman and faculty advisor Dr. Kelly Caverzagie, we envisioned a partnership between Nebraska’s leading physician-advocates and medical students who longed for a deeper dive into the policy issues impacting the patients and populations we serve. Since the HPN’s inception, we have hosted lively discussions on issues ranging from medical marijuana to healthcare financing to gun violence as a public health issue. Over the last year, our network’s membership has rapidly grown from a handful of

UNMC students to an active group of 30 UNMC & Creighton students with mentorship from a dozen physicians across the state. HPN members have testified at Nebraska Legislature hearings, passed resolutions through the AMA’s Medical

Student Section and House of Delegates, and helped educate classmates and colleagues on issues impacting the future of medical practice in Nebraska.

As the HPN’s co-creators and student leaders, we continue to be impressed and excited by the contributions of our peers. After reflecting more deeply on the impact of the HPN’s programs, we posit that the HPN also has an unanticipated yet similarly valuable outcome.

Physician burnout is defined by an array of symptoms including disillusionment, cynicism, and isolation, as well as a perceived lack of self-efficacy, control, and social support.¹ In the concept’s naissance, the term *burnout* was first described by a psychologist observing job-related stresses among staff caring for structurally vulnerable patients in free medical clinics.² As current medical students, we are constantly warned about countless contributors to modern burnout: “death by a thousand clicks,” burgeoning administrative burdens, feelings of disempowerment in the face of social inequity, and more. The combination of caring for patients whose needs extend far beyond the walls of our

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Health Policy Network dinner and discussion focusing on the 2020 Democratic Presidential Candidate healthcare policy platforms. Medical students from UNMC and Creighton worked in small groups to research the different healthcare platforms and share with the group to bring to light the differences and similarities in the different views of each candidate.

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clinics and confronting onerous barriers that disincentivize person-centered care can be exhausting for physicians, especially those who entered the medical profession with a desire to serve our most marginalized patients. We also recognize that these oft-encountered difficulties impact our peers' choice of specialty, their inclination to practice in underserved communities, and their attitudes towards patients with social complexity.

Programs like the Health Policy Network may be prophylactic against some of this cynicism. Extreme polarization pervades many aspects of today's society, including conversations about how to improve our healthcare system. It is easy to put our blinders up and obstinately pursue our selected "best" path forward, never seeing the varied landscape around us. However, this proves both futile and isolating, and such an intransigent mindset may very well contribute to some of the symptoms of burnout. On the other hand, while the vulnerability and the diligence required for true conversation can feel uncomfortable at first, it is only in such dialogue that we realize our common ground and discover the power of our collective voice.

With each HPN event, we strive to create a space for respectful and fact-based conversation across differences in perspective. While our initial goal was to deepen understanding of complex policy issues, we have now found that our "Dine & Debate" events may go beyond this to impact the wellness of students and physicians. The opportunity to reconnect with friends and mentors, enjoy a shared meal, and exchange ideas about the future of healthcare with well-informed colleagues engenders a sense of mutual respect and shared purpose. While our conversations do not end with a definitive answer to the ambitious topics we select for discussion, we hope our

members leave energized by their colleagues' bright ideas, empathetic to open discourse, and empowered to seek solutions together rather than trudging on in isolation.

The Flexnerian view of medical education was integral to elevating the educational missions of health institutions in the 20th century. However, advancing beyond the Flexner Report to pursue a "social mission" that serves the community has become a necessity for 21st century medical students.³ Our state's future physicians will be tasked with addressing exacerbated rural and urban health inequities while navigating a shifting regulatory landscape. By creating spaces like the HPN for trainees and experienced physicians to discuss health policy issues and build community with fellow advocates, we can sculpt a future health workforce for Nebraska that is equity-minded, mission-driven, and equipped with an effective antidote for burnout when faced with the inevitable challenges on the road ahead.

At the end of our most recent event, one physician remarked how the night's discussion gave him great hope for the future of medicine in our state and in our country. That sure sounds like a prescription for resilience to us.

Footnote: If you are interested in getting involved with the Health Policy Network as a medical student or physician mentor, please reach out to Amy Reynoldson (amyr@nebmed.org), Rohan Khazanchi (r.khazanchi@unmc.edu), or Laura Newton (laura.newton@unmc.edu). □

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