Burnout: The Perfect Storm Of Physician Stress

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To the literal-minded, burning out is the fate of light bulbs and matches. But whether you read the popular press or medical journals today, you're likely to find writers who are deeply concerned about physician burnout.

What defines physician burnout, and who exactly is suffering from it? Is burnout an actual clinical syndrome, a slang term connoting fatigue and boredom, or a hazy combination of the two? Which medical specialties have the highest rates of burnout, and are men or women physicians more susceptible? The more you read, the more you realize how much pop psychology and sloppy language are clouding an important issue.

A perfect example of murky logic comes to us courtesy of Dr. Danielle Ofri, who wrote a recent piece for *Time* called "The Epidemic of Disillusioned Doctors [1]." She claims that young women physicians who work in salaried primary care positions are more "resilient" than other doctors, and less likely to become disillusioned about medicine.

Now disillusionment and burnout aren't identical concepts. You can be quite disillusioned about the politics of medicine, and pessimistic about the future of private practice, while you take care of your patients every day with dedication and enthusiasm.

But in Dr. Ofri's view, disillusionment and burnout are twin states of mind, and they are the harbingers of medical errors, substance abuse and depression. The doctors she considers least likely to suffer such problems are those in her own demographic subset. "The newer generation of female, salaried, primary-care doctors have the most optimistic outlook on medicine," she writes. "This bodes well for patients."

Wait a moment. May we see the data to back up this claim? The source that Dr. Ofri refers to is a 2012 publication from The Physicians Foundation [2], a nonprofit organization that surveyed more than 13,000 physicians. The survey addressed professional satisfaction and morale, among other issues, and reached conclusions rather different from Dr. Ofri's.

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