Stressed Out Surgeons

Amanda Hankel, editor

The career of a surgeon certainly has its benefits. However, research in recent years shows the demands of the job may come with a price – a high risk of becoming burned out and depressed, and even contemplating suicide.

In a 2009 survey published in the Annals of Surgery, 40 percent of surgeon respondents reported being burned out and 30 percent screened positive for depression. Only 36 percent of surgeons said they felt their work left time for their personal life. A January 2010 study published in the Archives of Surgery revealed one in 16 surgeons contemplate suicide. Depression, burnout and the perception of having made a medical error all contributed to a surgeon contemplating suicide.

The conversation surrounding surgeon burnout and its consequences is not new in the surgical industry. The topic has become more debated and discussed in industry and the media as of late, likely because not only do these issues have a negative effect on surgeons, but also their patients.

Some argue that these issues, like not having time for a personal life, just comes with the territory for physicians. For example, in her New York Times article discussing the problems associated with part-time physicians, anesthesiologist Karen S. Sibert writes that medicine is a “life's work” and deserves to be treated as such. “If you want to be a doctor, be a doctor,” Sibert writes, meaning physicians need to choose between career and family.

When surgeons sign on to become physicians, they should do so knowing they will make a sacrifice in their personal life. Meanwhile, it seems that changes need to be implemented or tools must be provided to help surgeons address the risk of burnout

and depression. It's in the best interest of the surgeon, as well as the patient, as surgeons who show these symptoms are more likely to make a medical error.

At Harvard, researchers suggest physicians can avoid the problems associated with the stress – such as depression, burnout and suicide – if physician training is changed to something similar to that of “stress-hardy” groups, like the Navy SEALS. The researchers say resiliency can be taught, and it could help doctors deal with the stress associated with their career. If physician training focuses more on experiencing the long hours and difficult cases, these stressful situations will seem more manageable to surgeons once they're faced with them in practice.

Another approach, which you can read more about in the August issue of *Surgical Products*, suggests laughter is the best medicine for stressed surgical professionals. FunnySurgeryStories.com [1] is a website that works as a tool for surgical professionals to laugh, share their experiences and relieve the day-to-day stress the OR can bring.

Is there an all-encompassing solution to preventing surgeon burnout, depression and ideas of suicide? I’m not sure. But, I do think we need to continue to explore ideas to reduce stress and promote a healthy working environment – whether it’s changing the environment, or better equipping surgeons to handle their stress. It’s in the best interest of the surgeons, of the staff and ultimately, the patients.

What's your take? E-mail me at Amanda.Hankel@advantagemedia.com [2] or comment below.

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