

# The WVMPHP Program: More Than Just Substance Abuse Problems

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**H**ealth care providers (HCPs), including physician assistants, have been conferred the privilege to practice medicine. Along with this privilege, comes the significant responsibility of providing quality healthcare while meeting the physical and psychological needs of each and every patient we encounter.

Many aspects of the current healthcare system, the nature of the work itself, and the personality of the provider can make this a daunting duty. Some of the more significant areas of this responsibility include:

- Balancing the pressure of time constraints of the medical encounter with adequately addressing the patient's concerns to both the provider's and patient's satisfaction
- Knowing the practice of medicine is one of the few professions where an innocent or innocuous error can result in a significant negative consequences, including a fatal outcome, for the patient
- Realizing that a patient's illness frequently makes him or her narcissistic, which can lead to unrealistic demands and the belief that his or her concerns and problems are more important than those of other patients
- Acknowledging the practice of medicine is not a 9 to 5 job—even after direct patient-care hours, there is paperwork to complete, phone calls to return or make, on-call duties, and other responsibilities that must be met
- Being aware that the patient's perception is that the health care provider knows "everything" there is regarding the patient's healthcare
- Understanding the pressing needs to stay "current" with the ever changing medical knowledge, updated treatment guidelines, new medications, the latest diagnostic techniques, and the required paperwork associated with both the clinical and "business" aspects of practicing medicine
- Recognizing the demands that the practice of medicine place on HCPs impact the provider's personal life
- Realizing by focusing only on the patient's well being, the HCP risks neglecting his or her own self-care which can actually negatively impact his or her ability to care for others
- Being cognizant that the personality traits of most successful HCPs (e.g. perfectionism, workaholicism, and emotional detachment) are often the very attributes that adversely affect the provider's personal relationships and private life

On the other hand, the practice of medicine is very rewarding. The patients and their families are generally very grateful for the quality of medical care, empathy, and concern shown by the health care provider. It is self gratifying to be capable of making an elusive diagnosis, perform a life saving surgery, run

a successful code, or deliver a baby. Furthermore, socially it is associated with high regard, esteem, and respect within the community.

Therefore, it is no wonder that so many health care providers equate who they are with what they do. However, when the HCP is unable to balance the demands and rewards of practice with life outside of the office or hospital, he or she could be starting on a road leading to disaster. HCPs must have interest outside of the area of medicine from which he or she can derive personal pleasure, must take regular vacations (this does not include attending a CME meeting), and must take time for him- or herself to relax, reflect, and renew both body and mind.

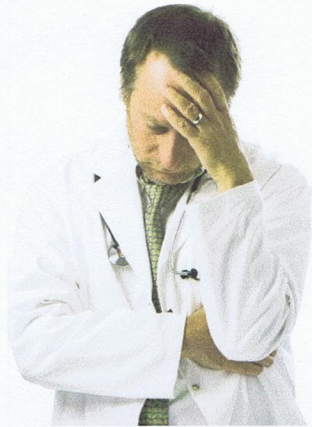
## Signs of Medical Provider "Burnout"

- Lack of control over work environment
- Disillusioned regarding profession
- Difficulty in maintaining work load and other job expectations
- Feeling overwhelmed at work or in general
- Feelings of hopelessness regarding employment situation or life
- Decreased interest and/or motivation in work
- Irritable with staff and/or patients
- Easily frustrated in the work environment
- Defensiveness
- Resentful
- Frequently blaming others for work difficulties
- Refusal of help despite feeling overworked
- Perceiving co-workers as incompetent
- Depersonalization
- Cynicism

When this balance fails to occur, the HCP is at significant risk for "burnout". "Burnout" is a state of extreme physical and emotional exhaustion caused by prolong and intense stress from working in an extremely intense and emotionally demanding environment for an extended period of time. "Burnout" does not occur overnight, it gradually develops over time. If the preliminary symptoms are not recognized and treated, it can result in significant physical illness (e.g. hypertension, myocardial infarction, chronic fatigue syndrome, or chronic pain syndrome) or psychological illness (e.g. major depressive disorder, suicide,

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substance abuse, or somatization disorder). These problems can potentially impact the HCPs ability to practice medicine safely.



Societal misperceptions and stigma that psychological conditions are not a physiological illness but a sign of “weakness” and health care providers are “perfect” (therefore, not prone to weaknesses) often encourage the HCP to ignore the symptoms, be secretive about the problem, or self-medicate instead of seeking the help of respected colleagues. . HCPs are not usually trained “who or how to ask for help”. Unfortunately, this only exacerbates the problem and begins a downward spiral of

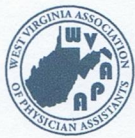
hopelessness, despair, poor performance, job related difficulties, possible substance abuse, mental illness, and occasionally difficulties with their medical licensure board.

Fortunately there is help available to physicians, physician assistants, and podiatrists who practice in West Virginia who have the early signs of “burnout” (see sidebar, *Signs of Medical Provider*

“Burnout”) to obtain assistance via early detection of potential problems, interventions, assisting the healthcare professional in seeking qualified evaluation and/or treatment, long-term monitoring and advocacy with regulatory agencies by the West Virginia Medical Professionals Health Program (WVMPHP). If a provider voluntarily enrolls, does not have pending disciplinary problems/investigation with their respective board of medicine, and complies with the goals and restrictions of the program, the legislative action that established the WVMPHP allows for voluntary and confidential participation without full identification to their licensure Board.

If you think you are experiencing a problem with “burnout” (or any other psychological illness) or are concerned about a colleague (referral sources are kept confidential), please call the WCMPHP at 304-414-0400 and arrange to talk confidentially the medical director, Brad Hall, MD, WVMPHP today, because tomorrow might be too late...

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