

Caring For Our Care Providers

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When it comes to thinking about the challenges in our health care system, most people usually jump to consumer related issues such as insurance, lack of providers, or lengthy wait times even with a referral. This is unsurprising as for every 10,000 United States citizens, there are only 28.2 doctors as of 2019, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2023, June 26). The lack of doctors and healthcare specialists despite the high demand for them is caused by a multitude of challenges care providers must face, most of which go unacknowledged. There are some which most people are aware of like the large amounts of financial strain and usually unavoidable student loans, but some struggles that people are less aware of is the emotional and mental strain that comes with working in healthcare.

The Path to Healthcare

Becoming a healthcare professional is no easy feat, following the most well-known path, to become a physician you will typically spend four years pursuing an undergraduate degree. If you start college at eighteen, you will finish that around twenty-two. Then, after achieving your undergraduate degree, you study more to pass the M.C.A.T. (Medical College Admission Test). If you successfully pass the first time, another four years will be spent in medical school, followed by hopefully passing the United States Medical Licensing Examination. Once a license is issued, residency begins. For a family practitioner, residency is usually three years, but for a neurosurgeon it is seven years (Washington University of Medicine in St. Louis).

Even if a career in healthcare that requires less school time is chosen, there is no guarantee that a qualified applicant will be accepted due to the shortage of faculty,” U.S. nursing schools turned away 91,938 qualified applications (not applicants) from baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs in 2021 due to insufficient number of faculty, clinical sites, classroom space, and clinical preceptors, as well as budget constraints,” (American Association of Colleges of Nursing).

Impact of the Path

For a family practitioner, that means you would begin individual work around thirty. According to Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, between the ages of nineteen and twenty-nine is the phase of early adulthood. In this stage you should be forming close, mutually dependent relationships with others, if not, you may fall into isolation (McLeod, Simply Psychology). Failing to develop relationships may lead to an inability to do so in the future, as well as depression and disconnection.

During the entire stage of early adulthood, a student studying and practicing to become a physician, surgeon, etc. will be occupied with school, internships, shadowing, and residency. Not only does residency take three or more years of your early adulthood, it also can come with incredibly long exhausting hours," Depending on their specialty and rotation, medical residents on average put in between 40 and 80 hours each week. The maximum number of continuous hours that first-year residents may work is 16, while more experienced residents may work continuously for 24 hours," (Torres, 2023).

Mental Impact

With such rigorous work, it is unsurprising that according to the CDC,"

- 93% of health workers reported being stressed out and stretched too thin.
- 82% shared being emotionally and physically exhausted; and
- 45% of nurses reported that they were not getting enough emotional support.
- 22% of healthcare workers experienced moderate depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder in a collective analysis of 65 studies.
- 69% of physicians reported experiencing depression and 13% had thoughts of suicide."

Despite such grim and intimidating statistics, there is a group looking out for our healthcare professionals at the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health with the Mental Health Initiative for Health Workers, who are working to spread awareness about the conditions health workers face.

Some of the best ways to promote healthy lifestyles for our healthcare providers are: cheaper education options/more available scholarships, attending study groups to promote socialization while still in school, provide onsite counseling, and implementing stricter scheduling to allow for recuperation post-shift as it is physically and emotionally exhausting, and potentially traumatizing to work in the fields they do.

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