



In the News

Study Highlights Effects of COVID-19 Burnout on Primary Care Physicians in 10 High-Income Countries

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A majority of primary care physicians in the US and 9 other high-income countries report that they are burned out as a result of increased workloads since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, with many saying it has affected the quality of care they provide, according to a new [report](#) from the Commonwealth Fund.

In addition, nearly half of older primary care physicians in most of the countries surveyed said they plan to leave the workforce soon. Such an outflow of physicians working in primary care is especially concerning, the report said, because for 2 decades or more, the US and other countries were already "bracing for a shortage of physicians, a problem that has reached crisis proportions in recent years."

In the US, for example, a 2021 [report](#) by the Association of American Medical Colleges, based on an analysis conducted in 2019 before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, projected an estimated shortage of between 37 800 and 124 000 physicians by 2034, including shortfalls in both primary and specialty care.

Burnout among physicians during the COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened the shortage, severely compromising people's access to basic primary care "at a time when regular health care has been disrupted and the prevalence of behavioral and mental health conditions has spiked," note the Commonwealth Fund report's authors.

The report presents findings from the 2022 Commonwealth Fund International Health Policy Survey of Primary Care Physicians, which was administered to nationally representative samples of practicing primary care physicians in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The analysis compares changes in physician workload, stress, emotional distress, burnout, quality of care delivered, and physicians' career plans.

More than half of physicians in all 10 surveyed countries reported an increased workload since the beginning of the pandemic, including 65% of US physicians and the vast majority of physicians in the United Kingdom (91%) and Germany (93%).

At least one-third of younger primary care physicians (younger than 55 years) in all countries—and nearly three-quarters of those in New Zealand, Germany, and the United Kingdom—reported having a "very stressful" or "extremely stressful" job. Although about half or more of older primary care physicians (aged 55 years or older) in 8 countries reported job stress, in each of these countries, the older physicians were significantly less likely than their younger peers to report being stressed by their jobs.

The survey also asked the physicians whether they had experienced emotional distress since the onset of the pandemic (including anxiety, great sadness, anger, or feelings of hopelessness) and to rate their current level of burnout. In nearly all countries, younger primary care physicians were more likely than their older counterparts to report emotional distress or burnout. In the US, for example, 61% of younger primary care physicians reported emotional distress vs 46% of their older peers, and 50% of the younger group reported burnout vs 39% of older physicians.

The finding that younger physicians in nearly all countries have been particularly affected by emotional distress is "consistent with research showing that emotional and psychological distress is higher among junior medical staff, even in countries with low COVID infection rates," the authors

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noted. "The reasons extend beyond the work environment and include the limited social supports that were available during lockdowns and uncertainty around the coronavirus's life course and its impact."

Despite high levels of stress, emotional distress, and burnout reported by survey respondents, those affected sought professional help for their mental health at modest rates, although younger primary care physicians were more likely than older ones to do so. In New Zealand, which had the highest rates of burnout and emotional distress, only 23% of younger physicians and 11% of older ones sought professional help. In the US, 16% of younger physicians and only 6% of their older peers sought such treatment.

The report notes that studies [have found](#) that stress and burnout can contribute to lower quality of patient care, with an increased risk of major [medical errors](#). When asked about the quality of care they offered during and before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many survey respondents, especially those who reported stress, emotional stress, or burnout, said that the quality of the medical care they were able to offer after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic worsened "somewhat" or "a lot" compared with before the pandemic.

In the US, for example, 28% of physicians who had stress, emotional distress, or burnout reported a decline in the quality of care they provided during the pandemic vs just 8% of those without such pressures. The rates of worsening quality of care among physicians experiencing stress, emotional distress, or burnout ranged from 16% in Switzerland to 55% in Sweden.

A substantial share of older primary care physicians in all 10 countries said they intend to stop seeing patients in the next 1 to 3 years, ranging from 31% in the Netherlands to 45% in the US to 67% in the United Kingdom. In all 10 countries, a much smaller share of younger physicians said they planned to leave the workforce in that time frame, ranging from 4% in the Netherlands to 14% in the US to 20% in the United Kingdom, despite their reporting higher rates of stress, emotional distress, and burnout from their work compared with their older peers.

If these planned departures from the health care workforce take place, the majority of primary care physicians in all surveyed countries may soon be professionals aged 54 years or younger who are burdened by stress and burnout, the report says.

Other recent reports on the health care workforce have similar findings about clinicians considering leaving the field. A [survey of frontline health care workers](#) conducted online and via telephone from mid-February to early March 2021 by KFF (the Kaiser Family Foundation) and *The Washington Post* found that 29% had contemplated no longer working in health care, including 27% of clinicians responsible for patient diagnosis and treatment. In May 2022, an advisory from the US Surgeon General's office [warned](#) that US physicians, nurses, and other health workers are experiencing burnout that exceeds even the "crisis levels" present before the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Especially in the wake of COVID-19, policymakers and health system leaders need to take steps to ensure that physicians practice in healthy work environments that are conducive to delivering quality patient care," including ensuring that all primary care physicians have access to and avail themselves of mental health services, the Commonwealth Fund report said, noting that the US "has made some initial progress on this front."

Last month, the National Academy of Medicine launched a [national plan](#) to tackle the "epidemic of burnout" and improve health worker well-being. The plan, the Commonwealth Fund authors noted, "will build on the U.S. Surgeon General's advisory, as well as related bipartisan policy efforts, to support the mental and behavioral well-being of health workers, including through the recruitment of additional mental health professionals dedicated to serving the health workforce."

ARTICLE INFORMATION

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