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Ten High-Income Countries Report the Effects of COVID-19 Burnout on Primary Care Physicians

According to a new report from the Commonwealth Fund, the COVID-19 pandemic increased the workloads of many primary care physicians, which led to widespread burnout, and impacted the quality of care. This has been the case in all 10 surveyed high-income countries.

The report compares changes in physician workload, stress, emotional distress, burnout, quality of care delivered, and physicians' career plans in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

At least one-third of younger primary care physicians – below the age of 55 years, in all 10 of the countries, experience extreme stress in their job. By contrast, older physicians aged 55 and older in 8 of the countries were less likely to report feelings of stress in their jobs compared to their younger peers.

In addition to this, younger physicians in almost all of the 10 countries experience emotional distress and burnout. For example, in the U.S., 61% of younger primary care physicians reported emotional distress and 50%reported burnout. This contrasted the burnout and distress levels of their older peers, which stood at 46% and 39%,respectively.

The study found that younger physicians who received limited social support during the pandemic lockdowns and encountered stress outside of their work environment were more affected by emotional distress.

Those emotionally affected and burned out sought mental health care at modest rates, with younger physicians seeking help more so than older physicians.

Although many of the older primary care physicians reported lower rates of stress, emotional distress, and burnout compared with their younger peers, many of them across the 10 countries, no longer intend to see patients in the next one to three years. 67% of physicians intending to leave were from the UK; the UK represented the largest share of older primary care physicians who planned to leave the workforce.

Should these planned departures materialise, the average age of the health care workforce will be 54 years or younger, who may be encountering high levels of stress and burnout.

Overall, the Commonwealth Fund reported that, "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". This involves ensuring all primary care physicians have easy access to mental health support.

Source JAMA Network

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