WMJ Report: System-wide approach creates culture of mindfulness in medicine

MADISON—Awareness around physician burnout and its potentially negative impact on patient care has increased, and thanks to a growing body of research, so too has the idea that mindfulness can help increase physicians’ well-being and assist in the delivery of better patient-centered care. A report in the latest issue of WMJ describes a system-wide intervention designed to cultivate a culture of mindful awareness in medicine.

“Mindfulness involves removing oneself from autopilot to live in the moment. To provide excellent patient-centered care, clinicians must be fully present, flexible, and recognize their patterns and beliefs, but that is not always easy. One can further develop this capacity through practice—cultivating mindfulness,” the authors wrote.

The authors from the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health in Madison, Wisconsin, selected five primary care leaders to attend a four-day Continuing Medical Education (CME) workshop on mindful communication in May 2012. Workshop and travel expenses were covered by grant funding, along with $500 in seed money for each clinician to foster mindfulness initiatives. The total cost of the year-long project was less than $15,000.

The primary care leaders, as well as a sixth colleague, initiated 10 different mindfulness activities throughout the academic health system and the state, reaching 538 participants in three distinct groups: medical students, clinicians and clinic/hospital staff and patients. The activities ranged from adding mindfulness content into the Training in Urban Medicine and Public Health (TRIMUPH) curriculum, to lectures, a conference, a four-week program that focused on mindfulness techniques of meditation and movement, and “Mindful Movement for Stress Management”—a six-week series of classes that promoted the use of breathing exercises and physical postures to help focus participants’ attention to the present moment.

All of the leaders endorsed the personal value of the training—with some describing it as life-changing. The feedback from the three participant groups was positive as well. Following two successful sessions of the “Mindful Movement for Stress Management” class for clinic and hospital staff, future sessions are being planned. Students reported that the mindful practices helped them

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retain their compassion, avoid burnout and also precluded them from becoming jaded when caring for patients in disadvantaged circumstances. A mindfulness class for internal medicine patients may transition into group visits.

“Based on existing mindfulness research, we believe that sustaining and building upon these initiatives will help to create health and resilience for clinicians and patients alike,” the authors wrote.

“We feel that our investment in the promotion of mindfulness yielded benefits that far exceeded our relatively low cost,” they added.

Published by the Wisconsin Medical Society, WMJ is devoted to the interests of the medical profession and health care in the Midwest. This peer-reviewed publication, which is available in print and electronic format, is one of the few state medical society-sponsored medical journals that publish a large amount of original research and academic content.

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