

Health care imbalances causing physicians acute anxiety

MEDICAL PRACTICE

Linda Nash



When visiting a cancer specialist, a heart surgeon or even a family physician, you see some nervous faces in the waiting room. But as I travel the country visiting medical practices, the nervous faces are on the physicians themselves.

For some time, the profession has suffered from what might charitably be called low-grade anxiety about its future. In a 2012 Physicians Foundation survey, more than three-quarters of those surveyed called themselves “pessimistic” about the future of the profession.

Today, with the advent of the Affordable Care Act, that anxiety can't be called anything but acute.

Like so many others, I am a strong supporter of implementing an affordable national health care system. However, if we can do so only under conditions that drive doctors out of the profession, we have to recognize that the overall system is flawed.

The Association of American Medical Colleges has forecast a national shortage of 91,500 physicians by 2020, including more than 45,000 in primary care. Under our current model, those primary care physicians act as the gatekeepers to specialists, so they already see enormous numbers of patients — an average of 4,000 each.

The profession is not replacing those primary care physicians fast enough even to sustain their current numbers; meanwhile,

the Congressional Budget Office estimates that the ACA will increase the number of Americans with health insurance by about 34 million in 2021.

Physicians are also facing uncertainty about reimbursements from insurers offering coverage through the ACA's state health insurance marketplaces. Hospitals, physician groups and individual doctors expect they will have to see many more patients, increasing their workload and reducing the amount of time they can spend with individual patients.

The prospect of practicing medicine in bulk — which many primary care physicians already do, under our current insurance-driven model — is a harrowing one for doctors who entered the medical field to develop genuine relationships with those whose lives they affect. Few of them, in any case, went in thinking of patients as assembly-line units.

The new pressures are making medicine even less attractive than it was in 2012, when in the same Physicians Foundation survey, 57 percent of doctors said they would not recommend a medical career to their children or other young people. Unfortunately, the numbers make this a particularly dangerous moment to discourage our youth from becoming doctors.

Not only is it difficult to recruit new phy-

sicians, it is increasingly difficult to retain them, as well. I speak with physicians frequently as I recruit them for a concierge medical practice that is less dependent on insurance reimbursements than the prevailing model, and that allows doctors to service a fraction of the number of patients that their peers do.

Many are questioning their future. Before he joined us, one of our doctors was about to leave the profession and become a professor. Another was ready to leave the clinical field for a career on Capitol Hill or in research. Years later, these doctors tell me they've never been happier.

The realities of modern practice are causing doctors all around the country to leave a most honorable calling. It is time for physicians to not just look out for their patients but also for themselves. We need to continue to create innovative alternatives that

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will allow good doctors to keep doing what they love. If they leave the profession, all of us will suffer.

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