

Editorial Page
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SUICIDE RATE IS ALARMING

Health care system takes a big toll on physicians, too

THERE has been much discussion, and with good reason, about the strain that the nation's health care system is placing on individuals and insurance companies. Consumers' premium costs are rising, and more and more insurers are leaving the Obamacare exchanges because they're losing money.

An issue that gets far less attention is the strain felt by health professionals themselves. Consider:

Roughly 300-400 physicians die by suicide in the United States each year. That's about one per day. Suicide deaths are 250 percent to 400 percent higher among female physicians when compared to females in other professions.

"Of all occupations and professions, the medical profession consistently hovers near the top of occupations with the highest risk of death by suicide," Dr. Louise B. Andrew wrote this month at Medscape.com, a website that tailors to physicians and health care professionals.

Andrew, a fifth-generation physician and former teacher at Johns Hopkins University, added, "Perhaps even more alarming is that, after accidents, suicide is the most common cause of death among medical students." Indeed according to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, medical students have rates of depression that are 15 percent to 30 percent higher than the general population. Depression, of course, is a major factor in suicide deaths in all populations.

Burnout is another problem for docs. A December 2014 editorial in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* said burnout rates ranged from 30 percent to 65 percent across specialties. A 2015 survey by Medscape showed similar results, with the highest rates found in critical care and emergency medicine. But about half of all family physicians, internists and general surgeons reported burnout in the Medscape survey.

A Tulsa orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Marcy Word Clements, wrote last week on Facebook about the annual meeting of the American Osteopathic Academy of Orthopedics. As the conference got underway, Clements said, most of the topics dealt not with orthopedic surgery, "but rather the epidemiology and scope of burnout, depression, and suicide among medical students, physicians in training, and practicing physicians (this speaks volumes!)."

She noted that the rates for these problems are on the rise among practicing physicians, and that based on several studies, the "major contributing factors are government intrusion in the practice of medicine, loss of autonomy, long work hours, and requirements of EMRs that are cumbersome and inadequate." EMRs are electronic medical records, which the government mandated as part of the 2009 stimulus package.

A report last year by the Association of American Medical Colleges estimated the United States could have a shortage of 90,000 physicians by 2025. There is no reason to believe that number will shrink as the Affordable Care Act continues — which means the stress and strain on existing doctors will only heighten.

In her post, Clements expressed her great relief in learning her oldest son had chosen a different career path. Noting the story of a man whose son died by suicide just days before he was to graduate from med school in 2015, she wrote, "I don't understand why anyone would want to pursue a career as a physician in the current health care environment."

That's a sad commentary, and is but one reminder that as policymakers look for ways to improve U.S. health care, they must consider not only its impact on insurance companies and consumers, but on the country's physicians as well.
