



## RESEARCH NEWS

# Doctor burnout costs the US \$4.6 billion annually, study finds

Institutional and policy spending on burnout reduction programs for doctors would have significant economic value, the study's authors wrote.

By **THE DO STAFF** Email WEDNESDAY, MAY 29, 2019

Researchers examining the costs associated with physician burnout conservatively estimate that chronic occupational stress among doctors is costing the U.S. \$4.6 billion per year, according to a new [study](#) in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

The study focused on the costs of doctor turnover and doctors reducing their clinical hours. The authors determined that the cost to individual institutions is \$7,600 per employed doctor per year.

"Physicians find practicing medicine harder than ever because it is harder than ever," wrote Edward Ellison, MD, executive medical director of the Southern California Permanente Medical Group, in a companion [editorial](#).

“Nearly everything a physician does in 2019 is monitored, rated, assessed, and reported. The electronic health record has many benefits but it can also be a burden, adding substantially to the time physicians spend in front of a computer screen while robbing them of what brings them joy: spending time with their patients.”

## *Physicians find practicing medicine harder than ever because it is harder than ever.*

Addressing physician burnout at the institutional level would greatly benefit both physicians and their patients. Coupled with previous evidence demonstrating that a moderate amount of spending can reduce burnout, this new study suggests that burnout reduction programs for doctors would have significant economic value, the authors wrote.

### **WHO includes burnout in ICD-11 as an occupational phenomenon**

In related news, the World Health Organization recently expanded its [definition of burnout](#), which it characterized as an occupational phenomenon. Burnout is not classified as a medical condition in ICD-11 but as a non-disease-related reason someone might seek health care.

#### **WHO's new definition:**

“Burnout is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
- Increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and
- Reduced professional efficacy.

Burnout refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.”

WHO's new definition of workplace burnout could help raise awareness of the issue not only among health care workers but also among other individuals and employers, Elaine Cheung, PhD, a professor of medical social sciences at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, told [NPR](#).

There needs to be more discussion on how to precisely measure and define burnout, Dr. Cheung said. These sentiments were echoed in [two JAMA studies and an editorial](#) on physician burnout published last year.