

From the President's Desk

The well pathologist

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February 2024—Even before the pandemic, burnout had become a major issue in medicine. Today, the effects of too much stress, staff shortages, and increasing demands have become so widespread in health care that they cannot and should not be ignored.

Although pathology is one of the medical specialties least likely to be associated with burnout, pathologists have not totally escaped this trend. Indeed, our work has certain unique traits that put us at risk of stress and potential burnout. Unlike our fellow clinicians who work directly with patients for much of each day, pathologists work mostly behind the scenes. We have little control of our workload and tremendous pressure to turn results around quickly, accurately, and with increasingly detailed reports. Although our work represents the foundation of patient care, our efforts may go unnoticed and unappreciated by our patients and even by our physician colleagues. Pathology is also the most highly regulated specialty in medicine, increasing the challenges to comply with detailed regulatory requirements.

Complicating the situation, a worsening shortage of pathologists means we're all handling higher case volumes, often with more financial pressure than ever before. Given the challenges we face, I want to use this month's column to shine a light on pathologist wellness—not just the important goal of preventing burnout but also promoting the satisfaction and sense of fulfillment we all deserve to get from caring for our patients. After all, it's when we're well ourselves that we're able to provide the best care for others.

The CAP has taken a leadership role in advocating for wellness in our profession. At our annual meeting in 2020, we had a plenary session on this topic to raise awareness and foster a robust discussion among attendees. In 2021, the CAP Council on Membership and Professional Development formed a Wellness Project Team, co-chaired by Michael Cohen, MD, and Marisa Saint Martin, MD. This team has spent the past 18 months assessing wellness and burnout among our members. I'm determined to see the great work this group has done lead to continuing CAP efforts to promote pathologist wellness.



Dr. Karcher

The Wellness Project Team surveyed CAP members to establish a baseline of where we are today. Based on responses from nearly 500 CAP members, results showed that 41 percent of pathologists reported experiencing at least one symptom of burnout often or all the time. This has serious consequences: 39 percent of respondents said these feelings made them consider quitting pathology, and 35 percent said burnout increased their chances of making medical errors. Full results of the survey will be published soon.

In addition to assessing the overall wellness of pathologists today, the project team has also made important progress in promoting wellness. You may have noticed at the last annual meeting the addition of a wellness lounge. It was a room dedicated to helping people recharge in the midst of an event that can often feel

overwhelming. Visitors to the wellness room were able to meditate, unwind, and refocus—all to help balance out the busy schedules, noise, and crowds that are characteristic of our whirlwind annual meetings. Attendees could also participate in activities such as a coloring board, community posters, ergonomic exercises, and making blankets to be donated to the local children's hospital.

A longer-term asset established by the project team is a page on the CAP website full of wellness-related resources for pathologists. It features articles, books, courses, webinars, podcasts, social media discussions, and other resources that can help pathologists spot the signs of burnout, deal with stress, and promote their own well-being. If you haven't checked it out already, I highly recommend spending some time on this page. You can find it on the CAP website by searching "wellness resources for pathologists."

I encourage you to think of things you can do every day to increase your overall sense of wellness to ensure a long and rewarding career as a pathologist. In parallel with your personal wellness journey, I also recommend creating awareness about this important issue in your workplace so institutional-level strategies can be promoted. We're all familiar with the sinking feeling we can get when confronted with a pile of slides to read or a raft of reports to sign. When we're stressed or burned out, it's all too easy to stop thinking of those materials as representative of individual patients; we can see them instead as obstacles to finishing our workday and going home. To deliver the best care for our patients, we have to take care of ourselves too. Whether it's clearing a moment each day for meditation or going for a walk or joking with colleagues, or anything else that helps to make your load feel lighter, it's well worth the time to keep yourself well (healthy, satisfied, fulfilled) as a pathologist.

Dr. Karcher welcomes communication from CAP members. Write to him at president@cap.org.