Physician Suicide: Healers Unable to Heal Themselves

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Physician Suicide: Healers Unable to Heal Themselves

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Background

- The phenomenon of physician suicide refers to physicians dying by suicide at higher rates than those of non-physicians, including other professionals.
- Each year 300-400 US physicians die from suicide. This equates to an average-sized medical school full of physicians dying by suicide.
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death in the US of medical residents, and is the leading cause of death for male residents.
- Meta-analysis demonstrates suicide rates among male physicians are approximately 40% higher than suicide rates of non-physician males.
- Among female physicians the rate of suicide is approximately 130% higher than that of non-physician females.
- 14.9% of US surgeons reported suicidal ideation (SI) within their lifetime and 11.2% of US medical students reported SI within the past twelve months.

Contributing Factors

- Several risk factors for suicide overlap with certain characteristics common for physicians
  - Substance Abuse Issues
  - Distinct Personality Traits
  - Increased Probability of Death by Suicide
  - Increased Incidences of Depression
  - Periods of Social Isolation
  - Medical Expertise

Suicides By Residency Year and Quarter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Quarter 1</th>
<th>Quarter 2</th>
<th>Quarter 3</th>
<th>Quarter 4</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Residency Year 1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>Residency Year 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Residency Year 4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

A Gendered Issue

Female physicians face additional stressors such as
- Increased feelings of needing to succeed
- Feelings of increased stress or failure in relation to work-family balance
- Feelings of social disintegration
- Increased instances of gender-based and sexual harassment in traditionally male dominated fields
- Sexual harassment correlates with increased instances of depression and suicidal ideation

Out of 2,106 mother physicians in the US, 50% believed they had met the criteria for a mental illness, but did not seek treatment.

For every one non-physician male that dies by suicide, 1.41 male physicians will die by suicide. For every one non-physician female that dies by suicide 2.27 female physicians will die by suicide.

Relative Suicide Rates of Female and Male Physicians to Rates in the General Population of the Matching Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.5</td>
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<td>2.27</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.0</td>
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<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance

- To ensure adequate care of patients, physicians must also have complete physical, mental, and social well-being.
- Using a mean per-physician panel size of 1,751 patients, each year over 700,000 patients lose their doctors to suicide.
- The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) states that by 2030 the US could see a shortage of up to 120,000 physicians, reinforcing the need to prevent physician deaths by suicide.
- Physicians with depression made 6.2 times the amount of medication errors than their non-depressed counterparts.

Future Policies and Directions

- Changing attitudes with millennial generation
- Educational campaigns revolved around reducing stigmatization
- Encouragement of state medical boards to change wording of questions regarding mental health on medical licensing applications
- Anonymous screening and counselling for medical students and throughout residency programs
- Mental health apps and web-based therapy services
- Hospital and campus-based comprehensive and confidential wellness and suicide prevention programs