

Introduction

Physician Burnout within Urology: Results of the AUA Residents and Fellows Committee Essay Contest

Udi Blankstein, MD, AUA Residents and Fellows Committee 2019 Essay Contest Workgroup Chair
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

Physician burnout, which is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment, has become a significant and widespread topic within the field of medicine.¹ Although its effects are deeply personal, burnout is also a systemic issue that can be difficult and complex to solve, often leading to more medical errors, lapses in professionalism, interpersonal conflict, substance abuse, and depression and suicidality.^{1,2}

Urology as a specialty has not been immune to this disturbing trend. Indeed, burnout has been shown to not only affect trainees, but also the entire urological workforce, ranging from our allied health colleagues to our seasoned attending staff. Residents and fellows are no exception; recent statistics show that over 40% of urological trainees meet the criteria for burnout.^{1,2} While it is well-established that surgical training can be grueling, there is little doubt that burnout exacerbates the negative aspects associated with training, which may lead to significant mental health distress, increased career regret, and even more catastrophic outcomes.^{3,4}

The AUA Residents and Fellows Committee Essay Contest was launched in 2017 to promote self-reflection among urology trainees within the context of a creative writing contest. This year's theme, "How I Maintain Resilience in an Era of Physician Burnout," was chosen to echo the current zeitgeist within medicine, but also to highlight how individuals may triumph in the face of compassion fatigue, long nights and intense personal struggle. Reflecting on the hardships and successes of training in urology can have tremendous value and can lead to a greater sense of community and shared experience, especially during a time when we feel most alone and isolated.

We asked urological trainees (medical students, residents and fellows) to describe how they experience and deal with burnout and received 60 submissions from trainees in the U.S. and internationally. As our committee members reviewed the essays, it became apparent from our discussions that the personal stories depicted were all too familiar and relevant. From among these incredibly thought-provoking and immensely courageous entries, we selected one winning essay for publication, which follows here, in addition to three outstanding honorable mentions, which have been published on the AUA website.

Dr. Karen Wheeler, from the University of Texas Health Center in San Antonio, wrote this year's winning submission. In her thoughtfully crafted essay, she compares the discipline and routine of the military to the intensity of urological residency. The difficulties she experiences throughout her training are recognizable to us all, but the methods she uses to overcome the hardships are inspiring, including choosing your battles and finding the joy in life again. Dr. Wheeler's conclusions provide an important lesson for all urological trainees and staff alike. I urge all members of the AUA to read this essay and reflect on their own practices for coping, resiliency, and self-development in order to survive and succeed in training, and build a sustainable and robust career.

References

1. Maslach C, Jackson SE, Leiter MP. Maslach Burnout Inventory Manual. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press; 1996.
2. North AC, McKenna PH, Fang R, Sener A, McNeil BK, Franc-Guimond J, Meeks WD, Schlossberg SM, Gonzalez C, Clemens JQ. Burnout in Urology: Findings from the 2016 AUA annual census. *Urology Practice* 2017; 5:489-94.
3. Franc-Guimond J, McNeil B, Schlossberg SM, North AC, & Sener A. Urological burnout: Frequency, causes, and potential solutions to an unspoken entity. *CUAJ* 2017;12(4):137-42.
4. Dyrbye LN, Burke SE, Hardeman RR, Herrin J, Wittlin NM, Yeazel M, Dovidio JF, Cunningham B, White RO, Phelan SM, et al. Association of Clinical Specialty With Symptoms of Burnout and Career Choice Regret Among US Resident Physicians. *JAMA* 2018;320(11):1114-30.

How I Maintain Resilience in an Era of Physician Burnout

Karen M. Wheeler, MD, PhD, MSCR
University of Texas Health Center San Antonio
San Antonio, TX

At the end of my first week of college, I had blisters on my palms from doing push-ups. I discovered that, despite being in college, I was expected to keep my shoes shined, my rifle clean, and my bed rolled away during the day. The daily rigors of Virginia Military Institute (VMI) were many. Some days I managed to both study and keep my uniform tidy, while other days I chose to study over everything else. I cried from fatigue and sadness, but I also cried from joy.

I never guessed that VMI would be so like medicine. Looking back, it was at VMI that I realized a mantra that kept me grounded and resilient through college, into graduate and medical school, through residency, and ultimately in life: “Choose your battles.” Although simple, this statement has many facets. The battles you choose to fight are just as important as those you choose not to. And sometimes the battle itself is more meaningful than winning or losing.

Choosing to fight certain battles and not others has helped me through many situations. In college, it was studying over shined shoes and a non-wrinkled uniform. In graduate school, finishing experiments was chosen over time with friends. In residency and in medicine, there are so many perceived battles that can easily become overwhelming.

There was a point in residency when I came very close to leaving behind all the long-term plans I had fought for. Sleep deprived, call-weary, overweight, and unhappy, I was ready to turn my back on academia, residents, teaching, and maybe even medicine, though I had always wanted to be an academic physician. As I cried in my residency director’s office, he told me I needed to find the joy in life again. I realized then that I was trying to fight every battle that came up at work. All my energy was going into fighting clinic nurses to follow up on urine cultures; fighting against the Emergency Room for calling me about changing a suprapubic tube; fighting patients who insisted I was a nurse; and more. It left me with no energy to battle for my own health and wellness.

I realized that some of the unfruitful battling had to stop. While I would always choose to fight for the well-being of my patients, I couldn’t fight the rest of the medical system or the world to fit how I thought it should be. I stopped battling the ER to get urine cultures and often sent them myself. If I had to wait for a patient in the Emergency Room to get imaging, I would get a 20-minute nap or workout in while waiting for the page, instead of repeatedly hitting the “refresh” button on my computer screen. Rather than loathing every day of resident clinic, I decided to embrace the known schedule of those days and plan my own medical, dental, and wellness appointments at the end of clinic.

Winning the battle you fight is certainly rewarding, but choosing to fight knowing you are going to lose is sometimes just as important. At VMI, boxing was a mandatory class, and matches were set by the instructor. Dreading this, I was matched against my roommate who had spent years training in martial arts. I knew I was going to lose, but I had to fight my hardest or I would fail. I’m pretty sure I got a concussion; I definitely had a bloody nose. But I also earned a solid “B” in boxing class—and the respect of my instructor. In residency, choosing to fight a futile battle became a gesture of care. Although I knew it would be hard to get my patient a private room, I would ask, and usually get denied. But sometimes the fight itself is the outcome, and winning is just a bonus.

Repeating my mantra, “Choose your battles,” reminds me that I can’t mold everything in the world around me to fit what I think is right and good. Some people, and some processes, will not easily change. Sometimes the battle to change them is worth my energy; other times it is not. The battles that I choose to spend energy on define me, so I would much rather choose to fight for what I find important and to let the other things go. This keeps me grounded and it keeps me resilient, even if my shoes aren’t always shined, and even if I have to send that urine culture myself.