

The Physicians' Perspective: Medical Practice in 2008; Survey Summary & Analysis

**The Physicians' Foundation
October 2008**

Some 12,000 physicians, most of them in primary care, share their perspectives on current medical practice conditions in the United States.

Over 800,000 data points and thousands of written comments reveal the concerns, practice patterns and future plans of America's doctors.

"Something has got to be done, and urgently, to assist physicians, especially primary care physicians. The whole thing has spun out of control. I plan to retire early even though I still love seeing patients. The process has just become too burdensome."
Family physician, Texas

"I love what I do, but it's getting much harder to afford this love. I hope someone really smart can figure out what we should do." Family physician, New York

This survey "offers a unique and valuable insight into the practices and mindsets of today's doctors. The results paint a grim picture that could have drastic implications for the nation's healthcare debate:"

- 1) 49% of physicians said that over the next three years they plan to reduce the number of patients they see or stop practicing entirely.
- 2) 94% said the time they devote to non-clinical paperwork in the last three years has increased, and 63% said that the same paperwork has caused them to spend less time per patient.
- 3) 82% of doctors said their practices would be "unsustainable" if proposed cuts to Medicare reimbursement were made.
- 4) 60% of doctors would not recommend medicine as a career to young people, including their own children.
- 5) 65% said **Medicaid** reimbursement is less than their cost of providing care and 36% said **Medicare** provides reimbursement that is less than their cost of providing care.
- 6) Over 33% of physicians have closed their practices to Medicaid patients and 12% have closed their practices to Medicare patients.
- 7) Only 17% of physicians rated the financial position of their practices as "healthy and profitable."
- 8) If they had the financial means, 45% of doctors would retire today.

- 9) "Patient relationships" rated highest on the list of things physicians find satisfying about medicine, while "reimbursement issues" and "managed care issues" rated the highest on the list of issues physicians find unsatisfying about medicine.
- 10) Only 6% of physicians described the professional morale of their colleagues as "positive." 42% of physicians said the professional morale of their colleagues is either "poor" or "very low."
- 11) 78% of physicians said medicine is either "no longer rewarding" or "less rewarding."
- 12) Over 34% of physicians reported that their practices are not making a profit.
- 13) 63.4% work 51 hours or more per week while 38% work 61 or more hours a week.
- 14) Over 60% spend at least 11 hours per week on non-clinical paperwork duties. 63% said that the growing volume of non-clinical duties they face has caused them to spend less time per patient.
- 15) Over 60% of physicians said they see at least 21 patients a day.
- 16) 64.84% of physicians said that Medicaid reimburses them at less than their cost of providing care.
- 17) Over 43% said that "some HMO/PPO" plans reimburse them at less than their cost of providing care.
- 18) 36.10% said Medicare reimburses them at less than their cost of providing care.
- 19) About 76% of physicians said they are providing \$25,000 or more in uncompensated care a year.
- 20) Over 39% said they are providing \$50,000 or more in uncompensated care a year.
- 21) 84.24% of physicians said income was either "flat" or "decreasing."
- 22) Due to flat or declining reimbursement, 39.86% of physicians said they have been unable to provide their staffs with raises, 35.66% said they had been unable to purchase new equipment, and 34.54% said they have had to reduce the time they spend per patient.

The great majority of letters indicated that physicians have deep misgivings about the practice of medicine today and the future of the profession. Many feel the profession has been devalued. Many are tired of doing battle with third parties that rob them of time, energy and empathy.

The letters underscore the contention that many physicians are at the breaking point:

"I have wanted to be a doctor since I was four years old. I love science, interacting with people on a deep level, and the art of medicine. I am an excellent, humane primary care physician. If anything, I spend too much time with patients. I also spend far too much time on demeaning tasks that do not require a medical degree. I am burned out. My income is so low (because I spend so much time with patients and therefore see less) that I am in debt. It is disgraceful and disgusting that doctors who save lives (and who bear that responsibility) are treated the way we are today."

"Most of my friends who are still in practice are unhappy and many say they would not go into medicine today."

"Increasing overhead and declining reimbursement make it very difficult. Medicine is a wonderful profession but a terrible business. Tort reform and getting the legal profession out of the medical profession is a must."

"I'm very disheartened, disappointed over the state of the practice of medicine! The combination of low reimbursements, managed care issues and patient attitudes over the last three years have made the practice of medicine almost unbearable. If not for a son who I'm working to put through college and a house mortgage I would quit medicine in a heartbeat! I'm beat, tired and under appreciated. Sometimes I cry myself to sleep – wondering why I got into all this. Am I paying myself this month? Do I have enough to pay this month's debt and lease?"

"I cannot continue seeing fewer patients for less money and adding more paperwork requirements. I've had one nervous breakdown and would rather not do that again!"

"It is sad that the legal system makes it so easy to sue without any repercussions to the plaintiff. Law suits drain you no matter the outcome."

"Solo practice stinks. You have to be in a group to handle insurance companies and lawyers."

"The practice of medicine is an art which has been severely damaged by managed care over the last 20 years. The practice of this ancient art has been "deprofessionalized." Physicians are treated like a commodity – like bedpans or linen – and patients are "zip-coded" to physicians and "capitated" like a cattle run."

"There are too many regulations, too many middlemen, too much paperwork, too little time to see patients leading to missed or delayed diagnosis, all of which is demoralizing to physicians because we can no longer put patient care first."

"Managed care is a polite form of rape. It rapes physicians."

"My retirement portfolio has disappeared in trying to maintain my practice. Medical practice has been one of the greatest joys of my life, but has been a financial disaster."

"The practice of medicine has been degraded by insurance companies, lawyers and the government. We are no longer doctors – we are now health care "providers" equal to Nurse Practitioners or Physician Assistants. Every decision we make is questioned by insurance companies. Lawyers see us as "big pockets." Some patients walk into our office and tell us what they need based on commercials they have seen on TV and the Internet. Are we happy? What do you think?"

"I do not see why anyone would go into medicine at this time and very much regret having chosen medicine as a profession. I would never recommend medicine as a profession to anyone."

"I am frustrated by the current state of health care in the U.S. The government has taken the "profession" out of medicine by micro-managing every aspect. Reimbursements continue to fall while my overhead climbs while patient expectations and entitlement along with the malpractice climate has become a nightmare!"

"We are being micro-managed by every Tom, Dick, and Harry in the United States. Medicine has become impersonal, businesslike, and full of hassles."

"The cost of running a solo practice and the time needed to manage practice administration are killing me."

"No money, no glory, lots of worries."

"I make close to the average American salary of \$37,000 although I haven't had a vacation in six years and I'm on call 24/7."

"Malpractice fees and defensive medicine are the greatest burden in my practice Tort reform is the number one priority in my practice."

"Lawyers, who do not have the responsibilities that physicians have, are slowly killing the joy of practicing medicine. "

"I plan to quit as soon as I possibly can."

"I am a busy internist but am paid very poorly (\$84,000 before taxes) because that is all that is left after overhead is paid along with health insurance. I would NEVER do this again and it is killing both my husband and myself. I HATE my job!"

"I love being a doctor but I hate non-medical people trying to tell me what to do."

"We as physicians are held hostage by the insurance companies. It is obvious that physicians lost the battle many years ago and caved into the insurance companies."

"Get the middleman, blood-sucking HMOs and PPOs out of health care!"

"I put everything I have into treating my patients. I'm about to lose my family for nothing. Just because I try to take good care of my patients – but it's just too much

work and nothing in return. My children have suffered because of time without their dad."

"When I graduated from medical school in 1983 I would not have believed it if someone told me you can't make a decent living as a primary care physician!"

"The physician patient relationship has been undermined by lawyers and managed care. Their propaganda has contributed greatly to the progressive loss of our nation's soul."

"It is painful to sit on the phone for hours trying to get insurance companies to authorized or to approve required medications."

"Of taxes collected for Medicare, only 9% go to physician fees. Third parties and personal injury attorneys make most of medicine's profits."

"Hairdressers charge more than what we receive for office visits."

"The practice of obstetrics is almost suicidal. To pay malpractice would mean I would earn less than the person cleaning my office."

"The country demands quality care at a lower cost – which is not possible. Imagine telling Mercedes Benz to sell their cars at the price of a Hyundai. It's not possible."

"We are drowning in a sea of regulation and paperwork."

"Medicine has become more work, more hassle, less prestige, less compensation year by year."

"Bean counters have taken over decision making in health care."

"For two decades, liability, paperwork, and frustration from dealing with third party payers have risen. Reimbursement has suffered a slow but persistent erosion. Many physicians are on the brink of quitting."

"I had to leave private practice because I couldn't make a living. As an employee, however, I have lost all of my autonomy."

"The gift of medicine has become a curse. The art of medicine has been replaced by a script written by those who are not gifted but hired, elected or appointed to make statistics fit."

"Please help doctors do what they really want to do – which is take care of you! Do away with HMOs/PPOs that swindle the money in between doctors and patients."

"It amazes me how paralegals and plumbers make more money per hour than pediatricians."

"If I could spend less time worrying about how a lawyer will see each case I do and

spend less money defending possible lawsuits the cost of medicine would drop, my income and satisfaction would improve and likely my patient outcomes would improve.”

“Insurance companies must not dictate how medicine is practiced.”

“It is regrettable that physicians need to hire a billing firm to collect reduced fees and have to pay for it. There is something wrong with that picture.”

“Regulations are becoming such a burden that they are taking time from actual patient care. I spend three to four minutes per patient visit checking to make sure documentation supports billing (particularly for Medicare.) Over the course of a day that is one hour or 5 to 6 more patients I could see.”

“To young college students I would say – don’t go into medicine.”

“Legal regulations, medical liability, insurance costs and insurance company reimbursement abuses are so awful that at age 59 years and four months I retired.”

“Practicing medicine used to be fun. Now it is a tiring profession. Doctors who treat the whole patient are forced to pack our schedules for less money than last year. We are like everyone – living paycheck to paycheck.”

“I regret ever becoming a physician. This is the only business in the U.S. with giant conflicts of interest where insurance companies set their fees, my fees and malpractice fees and govern the who, what, how and when patients will receive medical care.”

“Paperwork! Paperwork is killing us!”

“As a young (33 years old) pediatrician, I feel trapped by my choice to become a physician. Declining reimbursement from payers (especially Medicaid) has forced my employer to cut physician salaries, in some cases by \$40,000 annually. This also happened at my prior practice. I have no chance of achieving the income my colleagues were making five to ten years ago. Next year, I will have to see more patients to achieve the same salary I am currently paid. With \$100,000 in student loans, I do not know how I will ever achieve financial security. Morale is low in general among physicians in our state. I would not choose medicine as a career again.”

“If costs continue to rise while reimbursements decline, there will be no way to keep medical practices open.”

“Managed care, malpractice insurance, poor reimbursement and overhead running at over 90% forced me to quit. I am no longer seeing patients.”

“Primary care docs are tired of the continuous pay cuts, reimbursement games, and endless paperwork.”