10 Tips for Using NPs and PAs to Curb Physician Burnout

By Aine Cryts
"The most obvious way that advanced practice clinicians can positively impact physician burnout is by sharing the patient workload. According to a recent study, nearly 83 percent of physicians agreed that nurse practitioners and physician assistants help alleviate the added workload caused by physician shortages and turnover. Almost half of those physicians felt that the impact was ‘significant.’"

-Mike York, chief operations officer at St. Louis, Mo.-based PracticeMatch, a national healthcare recruiting firm
"The answer to physician burnout lies in facilitating an effective, long-term collaboration between physicians and nurse practitioners. It's about changing the perception of what nurse practitioners can do."

-Nickie Burney, FNP-BC, MSN, family nurse practitioner program director and associate professor at Boston-based Simmons College School of Nursing and Health Sciences
Ensure the right level of experience

"There are some isolated circumstances in which hiring a nurse practitioner or physician assistant could actually make physician burnout worse. For example, if the advanced practice clinician hired is too inexperienced or requires a great deal of supervision or oversight, this could create additional work for the physician, and thus increase the physician's level of burnout or stress."

-York
"Evenly disperse the least fulfilling or menial tasks among your team of physicians and nurse practitioners. Devise a rotation system wherein all providers are equally responsible for performing such tasks when necessary. Attempting to delegate these things to one group only shifts the causes of burnout, and doesn't truly eliminate or address them."

-Burney
Consider potential cost savings

"There's a lot of potential capacity sitting in the U.S. health system that can be freed by applying digital technologies and tapping advanced practitioners, such as nurse practitioners or physician assistants, to deliver care. This works optimally when professionals work at the top of their license and some of the remaining labor is moved to other people, machines, technologies, or the customer. When done effectively, the healthcare system increases capacity, can improve burnout, and gains productivity by changing the cost of the remaining units of care. In the long term, this could bend the cost curve."

-Kaveh Safavi, MD, senior managing director and head of consulting firm Accenture's health practice
"Physician assistants play an invaluable role in helping to reduce physician burnout. In many practices, physician assistants manage their own patients. Other practices use a model in which a physician and physician assistant together care for an increased number of patients. In that model, each provider manages some patients on their own and they manage others together. This model reinforces continuity for patients when their usual provider is not available."

-Alison C. Essary, PA-C, associate director and clinical associate professor, School for the Science of Health Care Delivery, Arizona State University
"Invest in the ongoing professional development of nurse practitioners in order to ensure that they are practicing to the full extent of their professional scopes, and actively contributing to the clinical demands and evolution of the practice."

-Burney
"As with any hire, if personalities do not mesh, this could cause added stress for all clinicians involved. When hiring nurse practitioners or physician assistants, it's advisable to confirm each candidate's experience level and skillset in your specialty, as well as determining if their interpersonal skills and personality will fit comfortably within your current clinical staff. As long as the advanced practice clinicians you're hiring are vetted candidates, they should help alleviate physician burnout when they come on board and assist with the patient load."

-York
Staff according to patient demand

"Ensure your busiest times of patient encounters are also the best staffed periods of the day or week – even if it means more providers are working outside of standard business hours. For example, consider staggering providers' start and end times during a particular work day. It may be very helpful to have some providers start early and some stay late. If possible, assign providers to early or late starts depending on their preferences."

-Burney
Don't overextend APCs

"Develop a rotation schedule that is equitable if it's not possible to meet everyone's preferences. Repeatedly overextending providers is a major contributor to physician burnout, and nurse practitioners will not be immune to this either. Strategy, thoughtfulness, and provider input are critical to successfully revising providers' schedules and preserving their work-life balance."

-Burney