

# Murder of Physician Raises the Stress Level for All Clinicians

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Physician stress — indeed, the stress level for all medical personnel — has reached new heights.

As if it weren't enough that doctors work in a profession where it's almost more a question of when they'll be sued than if they'll be sued — where COVID, staff shortages and long hours, and patients frustrated over canceled procedures have caused unrelenting fatigue and stress — they now have to worry that an unhappy patient is going to buy a gun, walk into their office, and kill them.

That's exactly what happened in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where a patient complaining of pain after back surgery murdered his doctor and several others who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The temptation in the aftermath of such tragedies is to think about preventive measures: Make medical facilities "hardened" targets, like schools have become, with armed guards, metal detectors, automatically locking doors, physical barriers within, security cameras, and buzzers for entry — although hardening a large medical center where members of the community routinely come and go would be challenging.

What about the enormous stress on doctors, nurses, and others in the medical workplace? Physicians who have been sued for malpractice often describe how it changes the way they interact with patients: They now size patients up and make judgments about their potential litigiousness. Will the physicians now look over their patients' shoulders at the video feed from a security camera when they're taking a history? Will medical professionals be forced to make snap judgments about patients' psychological state before deciding whether to treat them?

Remember, there was a time when school shootings were unimaginable. Once one person crosses that line, others inevitably follow.

It could be a drug-seeking patient complaining of ongoing pain, angry because he can't get a new prescription. It could be a patient whose unpaid bill was turned over to a collection agency, angry because he's now getting calls from collectors. It could be someone who blames a physician for the loss of a loved one. It could be someone who would otherwise have filed a lawsuit, who now thinks he has a more effective option for exacting retribution.

Most of us would find it unbearable to live and work under the kind of stress faced by medical professionals today. And unfortunately, there is no short-term, systemic relief on the horizon. But there are methods of relieving at least some of the psychological burden being carried by these dedicated individuals.

For starters, the government should provide funds to improve safety and security at medical facilities. It's sad but it's a fact of life. The physical structure of schools, along with emergency procedures, have been changed since Columbine and Sandy Hook, and our children and their teachers undergo active shooter drills. Healthcare facilities will need to adopt similar strategies.

But if we don't also support the individuals who work in healthcare, we'll no longer have even partially staffed healthcare facilities. Hospitals and medical groups need to be conscious of the effects stress may have on them. Medical staff and administrators need to recognize changes in their colleagues' behavior and refer those individuals to professional stress coaches who can get them back on track.

Medical personnel should be picking up on warning signs, like irritability, depression, sudden weight gain or loss, lack of motivation and job satisfaction, obsessiveness, unusual levels of fatigue, alcohol or drug use, and, of course, avoidable medical errors.

In addition, colleagues in the medical workplace need to know each other well. They are usually the first ones to notice if something is off and may be in the best position to refer coworkers for help. Also, medical malpractice insurance carriers should consider encouraging and covering coaching sessions because helping physicians cope with this heightened stress will prevent medical errors and the lawsuits that inevitably accompany mistakes.

This needn't be a long-term process like ongoing psychotherapy; a few sessions with a well-trained coach may help psychologically challenged peers restore their focus and perspective. It won't eliminate the threat any more than litigation stress coaching eliminates the threat of being sued but it can prevent that stress from leading to avoidable errors. It also can prevent physicians' personal lives and relationships from going off the rails and driving them out of the medical profession.

None of us can afford to ignore the impacts that these new stressors are having and simply act as if it's business as usual. The people in the trenches need our help.

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