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Longitudinal assessment of physician wellness during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Physician wellness
COVID-19 pandemic
Adaptation
Longitudinal

ABSTRACT

Physician wellness was greatly impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Busy clinical services, personal safety concerns, changing guidelines, and compassion fatigue weighed on physicians. Although studies have examined physician wellness, few have studied how it changed over time. A survey about wellness was distributed to 299 physicians at Ascension St. Vincent Hospital-Indianapolis March 2020, July 2020, November 2020, and March 2021. Physicians also free-texted about their well-being during the pandemic. Participation rates over the four time periods averaged 22.23%. Responses were compared among the time periods using Pearson Chi-Square and Fisher’s Exact Tests. Six wellness factors (anxiety, worry about becoming ill, worry about infecting family, worry about caring for children, concern about personal finances) were reported as worse after the pandemic began, but statistically significantly improved over the course of the study. In contrast, seven wellness measures (increased issues with depression, frustration, hopelessness, fatigue, dread going to work, worry about missing work, worry about caring for family), that also worsened after the pandemic began, did not statistically improve over time. Physician wellness was impacted by the pandemic; however, not all measures followed the same course over time. Longitudinal assessments of wellness can help inform programs to best support physicians.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had sudden, dramatic and far-reaching consequences on our society (Vahratian et al., 2021; Brooks et al., 2020; Galea et al., 2020; Mukhtar, 2020; Cava et al., 2005). Health care professionals, in particular, have had the burden of seeing the devastation of the disease first-hand while also being concerned about their own health and well-being (Byrne et al., 2021; Erdem and Lucey, 2021; Kazmerski et al., 2021; Cabarkapa et al., 2020; Rezaei, 2020; Zarefsky, 2020). Confusion from rapidly changing guidelines and information as well as challenges from deployment to other services to help cover patient care contributed additional stress (Kazmerski, 2021; Bansal et al., 2020; Restauri and Sheridan, 2020). At the same time, job security was threatened as health systems dealt with the financial implications of the pandemic (Cheney 2021, Kazmerski et al., 2021, Fincher, 2020, Gold, 2020). And, finally, like all of society, health care providers were concerned and grappling with their family’s health and their children’s education while coping with the isolation imposed by social distancing (Randell et al., 2021; Brooks et al., 2020; Brubaker, 2020; Shanafelt et al., 2020). Literature has shown that physician wellness was already an issue before the pandemic (AAMC, 2021; Hartzband and Groopman, 2020; Shanafelt et al., 2020; Cull et al., 2019; Kalmoe et al., 2019; Friedberg et al., 2014), but several studies have shown that the wellness of health care professionals has suffered even more during this time (Rosenberg et al., 2021; Bansal et al., 2020; Cabarkapa et al., 2020; Conti et al., 2020; Dewey et al., 2020; Sanghavi et al., 2020; Friedberg et al., 2014). Increasing rates of anxiety, depression, and stress have been documented (Conti et al., 2020; Sanghavi et al., 2020; Shanafelt et al., 2020; Temsah et al., 2020). Other, more unexpected, consequences such as prejudice and discrimination secondary to concern that health care providers are at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 have been described (Randell et al., 2021; Makino et al., 2020). Many institutions have proactively developed systems to handle the mental health needs of their work-force including such strategies as assessing the needs of its health care workers, developing task forces, creating mechanisms to assist with basic needs, increasing communication, and developing hotlines (Dewey et al., 2020; EClinicalMedicine, 2020; Feinstein et al., 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Hou et al., 2020; Nochaiwong et al., 2020; Restauri and Sheridan, 2020; Ripp et al., 2020; Shapiro and McDonald, 2020).

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2022.114739
Received 21 September 2021; Received in revised form 20 July 2022; Accepted 21 July 2022
Available online 26 July 2022
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It is also important to acknowledge that living organisms also have the ability to adapt to stress. Hans Selye described the general adaptation syndrome which represents “a generalized effort of the organism to adapt itself to new conditions (Selye, 1950: 1383–92).” As the pandemic has extended over a prolonged period, humans have similarly had to develop coping strategies to deal with the "new normal".

Ascension St. Vincent Hospital-Indianapolis is a large health care campus in Indianapolis with over 4000 employees. Leadership instituted several changes to support the workforce during the pandemic; however, as expected, there were significant changes in the general well-being at the institution. Seeking to do a needs assessment to help inform how best to support physicians at our institution, the study team developed a survey at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was distributed among staff and resident physicians to assess how the pandemic had affected wellness. As the pandemic persisted, the study team continued to periodically survey the physicians to explore how the wellness indicators changed over the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Methodology

On March 11th, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic. The initial intention of this project was quality improvement in order to help leadership address wellness during the pandemic. The Healthcare Personnel & COVID-19 Survey (Appendix A) was developed and first distributed to Ascension St. Vincent Hospital-Indianapolis personnel on March 16th, 2020. The authors used the Maslach Burnout Inventory and informal focus groups to guide the formation of the survey. The goal was to create a simple tool that physicians would find easy to complete and would resonate with the issues they were experiencing. Since no identifying information was collected among participants, survey responses were not matched or paired to individuals. Instead, the responses acted as the representation of physicians at our facility, with the expectation that participation rates would allow the sample to adequately represent the Ascension St. Vincent physician population. All responses were self-rated comparisons of how their current status compared to how they felt before the pandemic.

The survey solicited feedback among physicians and confidentiality was ensured in the consent language for possible participants. The initial survey cohort acted as the baseline response and the survey was implemented as a repeatable instrument that was distributed multiple times to track well-being through the pandemic. Physician responses were collected and compared in a cohort fashion with each time period being its own group at Baseline (March 16th, 2020), 8 weeks (May 11th, 2020), & 16 weeks (July 6th, 2021). The project was then converted to a human subjects research study to focus on the wellness factors questioned on each of the initial QI surveys (Ascension St. Vincent IRB #20,210,027). The authors included in this human subjects research study to focus on the wellness factors questions on each of the initial QI surveys (Ascension St. Vincent IRB #20,210,027). The authors included in this human subjects research protocol the intention to survey physicians at our facility again at the 1 year mark (March 16th, 2021).

Demographics collected from the survey periods were compared to the institution demographics provided by our facility human resources to ensure that our respondents were representative of the physician population. Wellness factors were presented to participants in three categories including health issues, work issues, and life issues. Some wellness topics were covered on all four surveys (i.e., baseline, 8-week, 16-week, 1 year); others were only discussed on two of the surveys (i.e., baseline and 8-weeks or 8-weeks and 16 weeks) based on feedback from our respondents.

Physician leadership was approached with the goals of the study and permitted distribution of the survey to hospital associates. REDCap (Harris et al., 2009) was used to create and distribute the survey link to Ascension St. Vincent Hospital-Indianapolis physicians using automated survey invitations to email physician listservs and a hyperlink included in COVID-19 update emails from hospital leadership. The surveys remained open for two weeks after each distribution. At the close of each survey, aggregated results were compiled. De-identified, aggregated results reports were sent to hospital leadership for consideration.

Resident and staff physician responses were compared to one another using Pearson Chi-Square and/or Fisher’s Exact Tests to determine if they could be grouped together as one cohort or if their responses would need to be considered separately. Demographics variables from the physicians were compared to the demographic distribution of the entire resident and staff physician group at the hospital using similar tests. The baseline, 8-week, 16-week, and 1 year survey responses were treated as cohorts and the difference in the distribution of responses was compared among these cohorts using Pearson Chi-Square and Fisher’s Exact Tests. A p value less than 0.05 signified a statistical difference in the distribution of the responses among these cohorts. When a wellness factor and the distribution of responses was found to be statistically significantly different between survey time periods, the survey response counts of “Somewhat worse since the pandemic” and “Much worse since the pandemic” were combined. This combination allowed the calculation of relative risk ratios. These relative risk ratios were calculated to reflect the change in “worse” ratings for the later time period examined. SPSS 24.0 (IBM, 2016) was utilized for descriptive and inferential statistics.

3. Results

Resident and Staff Physician demographics and responses were compared to one another within the completed baseline, 8-week, 16-week, and 1 year surveys and did not significantly differ in distribution among job descriptions (hospital-based vs. clinic-based) (x²=0.11, p = 0.74), care of COVID/PUI patients (x²=0.16, p = 0.69), sex (x²=0.06, p = 0.97), age (z=-0.04, p = 0.97), or how many had children or extended family living within their home (x²=1.55, p = 0.21). A comparison of staff and resident physician responses was completed among the self-reported wellness factors and statistical results can be seen in Table 1. There were no statistically significant differences in the distribution of responses among staff and resident physicians at baseline, 8-weeks, and 16-weeks. These findings supported the combination of staff and resident physician responses into one cohort group.

Participation rates and demographic characteristics of the combined resident-staff physician cohort from each survey period can be found in Table 2. Physician participation rates varied from 18.4% at 8 weeks to...

| Wellness Variables          | Baseline x² | Baseline p* | 8 Weeks x² | 8 Weeks p* | 16 Weeks x² | 16 Weeks p* |
|----------------------------|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|-------------|------------|
| Health Issues              |             |             |            |            |             |            |
| Insomnia                   | 0.54        | 0.76        | 0.58       | 0.22       |             |            |
| Depression                 | 0.55        | 0.26        | 0.69       | 0.92       |             |            |
| Anxiety                    | 0.31        | 0.86        | 0.66       | 0.85       |             |            |
| Frustration                |             |             | 0.28       | 0.16       |             |            |
| Feelings of Hopelessness   | 0.28        | 0.29        | 0.20       | 0.91       |             |            |
| Fatigue                    | 0.19        | 0.28        | 0.19       | 0.28       |             |            |
| Work Issues                |             |             |            |            |             |            |
| Dread going into work      | 0.22        | 0.90        | 0.49       | 0.47       |             |            |
| Worrying about contracting an illness from your patients | 0.91 | 0.63 | 0.29 | 0.06 |             |            |
| Conflict with coworkers    | 0.14        | 0.99        |             |            |             |            |
| Worry about missing work   | 1.94        | 0.38        | 0.29       | 0.21       |             |            |
| Life Issues                |             |             |            |            |             |            |
| Worry about infecting your children and/or family  | 0.58 | 0.34 |             |            |             |            |
| Worry about caring for your children | 0.27 | 0.68 |             |            |             |            |
| Worry about caring for your extended family | 0.46 | 0.79 | 0.28 | 0.15 |             |            |
| Personal Finances          | 0.80        | 0.81        | 0.31       | 0.09       |             |            |
| Conflict with Family       | 0.59        | 0.09        |             |            |             |            |

*Pearson Chi-Squares produce a chi-square statistic and a p value. Fisher’s Exact Tests have no test statistic associated and only produce a p value.
26.4% at the 1 year survey. The age, sex, and ethnic demographics for hospital physicians are listed in Table 2 as well. The baseline survey did not record demographics as the initial focus was to compare responses among job families and encourage confidential participation for quality improvement purposes. The follow-up surveys did request respondents to divulge their age category and sex. The total values for residents and showed no statistically significant difference in the distribution of health issues as similar to before the pandemic as time progressed. Although not statistically significantly different, this increase in “same as before the pandemic” responses were for “Feelings of Hopelessness” and “Insomnia” as well. In contrast, depression, frustration, and fatigue were static among physicians over time.

For work issues, a statistically significant difference in the distribution of responses was found for the topic “Worrying about contracting an illness from your patients” ($\chi^2 = 40.39, p < 0.001$). Similar to anxiety, higher response rates were found for “somewhat worse” and “much worse” during the baseline survey. These rates increased in the “same as before the pandemic” option as time progressed.

Under life issues, a statistically significant difference in the distribution of responses over time was found for the issues “Worry about infecting your children and/or family” ($\chi^2 = 11.11, p = 0.03$); “Worry about caring for your children” ($\chi^2 = 14.72, p = 0.01$); and “Personal Finances” ($\chi^2 = 13.15, p = 0.04$). The significant difference for “Worry about infecting your children and/or family” was reflected in the increase of physicians (42.3%) responding on the 1 year survey that they felt the “same as before the pandemic.” Physician responses to “Worry about caring for your children” showed an increase in the number of physicians stating their worry was the “same as before the pandemic” between baseline and 8 weeks. For “Personal Finances”, physician responses did not reveal a significant difference in response distributions until the 1 year survey. For these statistically significantly different wellness categories, the data shows that as time progressed, this worry diminished among physicians.

### Table 2

| Survey          | Participation Rate (%) | Rates (N = 299) | Age Categories | Total | 8-week | 16-week | 1 Year |
|-----------------|------------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------|--------|---------|--------|
| Baseline        | 61                     | 55              | 18.40%         |       |        |         |        |
| 8-week          | 71                     | 79              | 23.70%         |       |        |         |        |
| 16-week         |                        |                 |                |       |        |         |        |
| 1 year          |                        |                 |                |       |        |         |        |

### 4. Discussion

Within the first few weeks after the pandemic was recognized by the WHO, the survey revealed a significant number of physicians reporting worsening mental health as well as increasing concerns about work and family. Increased levels of anxiety were the most predominant with 80.4% (n = 49) reporting worsening anxiety post-pandemic. Nearly half reported insomnia (n = 30, 49.2%) and a third endorsed worsening depressive symptoms (n = 22, 36%). Concerns about work included most significantly a worsening concern about contracting an illness (n = 50, 83.3%) and worry about missing work (n = 28, 46.7%). Despite the increasing stressors, few physicians reported increased conflicts with coworkers (n = 8, 13.3%). Physicians also reported increasing stressors outside of work including caring for children (n = 28, 52.8%) and extended family (n = 43, 72.9%) as well as financial concerns (n = 24, 40%).

Comments included, “It has affected all my clinical and personal interactions. I feel isolated and have a sense of dread.”

“The pandemic has really shaken me. I have kids and other family that live in other parts of the country which feels terrifying. I worry a LOT about contracting the virus at work.”

“Everyone is exalting the courage of health care providers, but I don’t feel courageous...just scared”

The second time period was 2 months after the start of the pandemic and showed that some of the symptoms reported by the physicians at the start of the pandemic had been somewhat ameliorated, but others remained static. Increased anxiety was now reported by 66% (n = 32) of physicians, a significant decrease. Other measures that trended towards normal included worry about caring for children (n = 16, 32%) as well as concerns about personal finances (n = 15, 29.4%). Other measures such as depressive symptoms, fatigue, frustration, and hopelessness continued to be reported as worse compared to the baseline.

In response to feedback received after the first survey, we added a free text box inviting physicians to share how the pandemic affected them in a positive way. Responses focused mostly on increased gratitude, more time with family, and feeling less rushed.
Increased connections with some family and friends. Better relationships at work with people extending grace and kindness to each other.

Cleaner air and less traffic.

There has been some increased awareness of gratitude, focus on ‘core’ work and less conflict about distractions.

At the 4 month mark after the start of the pandemic, several issues continued to affect physicians. Measures that persisted as being worse after the start of the pandemic included depression (n = 22, 32.4%), frustration (n = 46, 65.7%), fatigue (n = 38, 55.9%), dread going to work (n = 26, 38.2%), and feelings of hopelessness (n = 18, 26.5%). However, although vaccines were not yet available and there continued to be surges, other measures began to trend towards the new normal. Anxiety, although still a significant concern, decreased to 58.5% (n = 41) of respondents who felt it was worse than before the pandemic. The concern of contracting an illness from a patient trended down to 69% (n = 49) as did concern about personal finances (n = 20, 29.4%).

Comments now seemed to indicate a decrease in the initial fear, but that was replaced with fatigue and resignation as well as frustration with the politicizing of the pandemic.
“Earlier feelings of fear, anxiety have mostly given way to a resigned numbness after the loss of a friend working abroad as a pediatric physician.”

“The initial terror has abated. But now it has been replaced by frustration about things like politicizing masks and more hopelessness, feeling that this is never going to be over.”

“The anxiety of the unknown and now the ever increasing false narratives about the virus coupled with increasing politicization has been very stressful and frustrating.”

There were similar themes in the positive effects free text box. “Increased appreciation for the simple things in life, downtime with family, spending time outdoors in nature and focusing on being grateful.”

“The quiet and stillness has been amazing with less traffic, less airplane noise and increased presence of natural sounds like birds!”

“I have been exercising a lot. So: I have lost 25 pounds since this started, and have gone from obese to merely overweight”.

We concluded our study in March 2021, one year after the pandemic was officially declared. Physicians overall showed resolution of some measured parameters but persistence of others. Although vaccines were available at this point, physicians still reported issues with frustration, feelings of hopelessness, and depression that were worse than before the pandemic. However, other measured variables such as anxiety, concern about caring for family members, infecting family members, and personal finances continued to trend towards pre-pandemic levels.

The repeated assessment of wellness factors allowed the authors to categorize the wellness factors in three different categories. Wellness factors either were 1) not perceived as worse than before the pandemic at any point during the study period, 2) initially reported as worse than before the pandemic and remained a static concern throughout the study period, and 3) reported worse than before the pandemic but improved over the study period (Table 5).

The results from this study support previous research showing profound effects of the pandemic on the well-being of physicians. Unlike previous studies, however, we sought to see how these measures changed over time. Self-report of symptoms from attending and resident physicians at this institution at the start of the pandemic showed that issues ranging from depression and anxiety to concerns about work and family were worse after the pandemic. Many of these wellness concerns remained static over time including feelings of depression and hopelessness; however, other measures such as feelings of anxiety as well as worry about caring or infecting family and financial concerns improved over the course of the year. Why these measures improved is unclear.

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There were similar themes in the positive effects free text box. “Increased appreciation for the simple things in life, downtime with family, spending time outdoors in nature and focusing on being grateful.”

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community and there needs to be continued work in learning how to best support them.

Limitations to this study include that we used an untested and rapidly deployed survey tool that was modified over the study period based on feedback. Secondly, although the survey was disseminated to the same physician group, we did not match results to individuals. This action was taken to avoid identifiers and offer anonymity to those physicians who participated. Third, our average response rate over the four time periods was 22.23%. There are several reasons that may explain our lower response rate. The physicians we surveyed were dispersed throughout multiple departments on a medical campus with over 4000 employees. Although our administration allowed us permission to survey physicians, the survey came directly from the authors of the manuscript with voluntary consent to complete it. Finally, we adhered to a fixed amount of time that surveys were open for completion (i.e., two weeks) which may have limited the response rate. Yet, we acknowledge, given the relatively low rate, that response bias may have occurred. Those who participated may have had differing problems with mental health and wellness issues, either positive or negative. Anecdotally, one physician did mention to the authors that they declined to participate because the survey “offended” them, feeling that our investigation of their wellness during a pandemic was inappropriate and that they did not appreciate us “studying their pain”. A fourth limitation of the survey did not specify definitions of each variable, instead allowing physicians to self-report how they felt each wellness indicator was impacted by the pandemic. Finally, since the survey was limited to one institution, it may not be generalizable to other populations. Future surveys of physician wellness should continue the longitudinal methodology employed here in order to replicate results. Understanding which wellness issues affect physicians more significantly should be considered in developing wellness programs during health crises and outside of them as well.

Funding source

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the following individuals in their assistance in the development or completion of this project: Dr. Curt Ward, Dr. Laurel Fick, Dr. Anthony Martin, Dr. William Swigart, and Dr. Jeffrey Rothenberg.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.psychres.2022.114739.

Appendix A. Healthcare Personnel & COVID-19 Survey (Template)

As health care providers, we are on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic. The stress of taking care of patients and worrying about our families and own health can take a toll. Please help us get a sense of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on your wellness. This survey is completely voluntary and your responses will remain confidential. If you have any questions, please reach out to Rita Patel, MD MPH at rita.patel@ascension.org. Thank you.

| Health Issues – Since the initiation of the COVID-19 pandemic, how much of the following are an issue for you? | Same as before the pandemic | Somewhat worse since the pandemic | Much worse since the pandemic |
|---|---|---|---|
| Insomnia | | | |
| Depression | | | |
| Anxiety | | | |
| Frustration | | | |
| Feelings of hopelessness | | | |
| Fatigue | | | |

Work Issues – Since the initiation of the COVID-19 pandemic, how much of the following are an issue for you?

| Work Issues | Same as before the pandemic | Somewhat worse since the pandemic | Much worse since the pandemic |
|---|---|---|---|
| Dread going into work | | | |
| Worrying about contracting an illness from your patients | | | |
| Worry about missing work | | | |

(continued on next page)
Conflict with Co-Workers

Life Issues – Since the initiation of the COVID-19 pandemic, how much of the following are an issue for you?

- Worry about infecting your children and/or family: Same as before the pandemic
- Worry about caring for your children: Somewhat worse since the pandemic
- Worry about caring for your extended family: Much worse since the pandemic
- Personal Finances: 

Conflict with Family

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