

# Burnout in Obstetricians and Gynecologists



Roger P. Smith, MD

## KEYWORDS

• Burnout • Depression • Exhaustion • Prevention • Stress

## KEY POINTS

- The risk of burnout is ubiquitous, placing all professionals at risk.
- It is estimated that 40% to 75% of obstetricians and gynecologists currently suffer from professional burnout, making the lifetime risk a virtually certainty.
- The spectrum of professional burnout varies from emotional fatigue to complete collapse, substance addiction, and suicidal ideation.
- Several simple strategies can blunt, if not eliminate, the risk of professional burnout.

## INTRODUCTION

There just never seems to be enough time to deal with all the directions in which one is pulled; the pace of life, its stresses, the impact of multitasking, and the unending bombardment of information have spiraled out of control. This can easily result in the exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation, otherwise known as *burnout*. Burnout is physical or mental collapse caused by overwork or stress, and all professionals are at risk—loss of control (real or imagined), conflicting demands on time from every direction, and a diminishing sense of worth erodes physician's lives.

It is estimated that 40% to 75% of obstetricians and gynecologists currently suffer from professional burnout, making the lifetime risk a virtually certainty.<sup>1,2</sup> In an online study of more than 15,800 physicians who responded to a survey that included the prevalence of burnout, defined as loss of enthusiasm for work, feelings of cynicism, and a low sense of personal accomplishment, more than one-half of obstetricians and gynecologists demonstrated burnout (**Fig. 1**).<sup>3</sup> Although these statistics make for a dismal view of the profession, if the causes and symptoms can be identified simple steps can be implemented to reverse the threat. With a little care, the enjoyment of practice can be restored and the sense of reward and the value of service can be returned.

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Charles E. Schmidt College of Medicine, Florida Atlantic University, 777 Glades Road, BC-71, Room 337, Boca Raton, FL 33431, USA

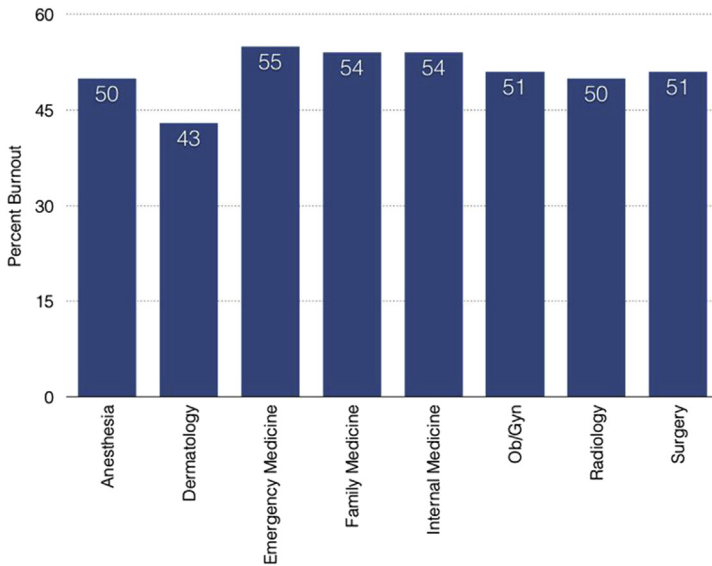
E-mail address: [rogersmith@health.fau.edu](mailto:rogersmith@health.fau.edu)

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**Fig. 1.** Prevalence of physician burnout in selected specialties. Selected results of an online survey of more than 15,800 physicians that included the prevalence of burnout (defined as loss of enthusiasm for work, feelings of cynicism, and a low sense of personal accomplishment). (*Adapted from* Medscape Lifestyle Report 2016: bias and burnout. Available at: <http://www.medscape.com/features/slideshow/lifestyle/2016/public/overview#page52>. Accessed September 16, 2016.)

## THE PROBLEM IS PERVERSIVE

### *All Physicians are at Risk*

Professional burnout is not new—what is new is the wider recognition of the alarming rates of burnout.<sup>4,5</sup> Physicians, in general, have burnout rates that are twice the rate of working adults, and no area of practice within medicine is immune to the impact of professional burnout (see **Fig. 1**).<sup>1,6</sup> A 2015 survey of plastic surgeons<sup>7</sup> found that nearly one-third (29%) of those surveyed scored high in subscale categories predictive of professional burnout, consistent with other national surveys.<sup>8</sup> In a sample of 127 headache medicine specialists, 66 (57.4%) physicians reported symptoms of professional burnout reflected by high emotional exhaustion or high depersonalization.<sup>9</sup>

A 2015, meta-analysis of burnout in emergency physicians found moderate to high levels of burnout with difficult work conditions including significant psychological demands, lack of resources, and poor support,<sup>10</sup> consistent with older studies that found rates of burnout in excess of 60%.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, these physicians reported high job satisfaction. Many pediatric emergency physicians report feeling burned out at work (88.5%) or more callous toward people as a result of work (67.5%) at least monthly, with 1 in 5 reporting such feelings at least weekly.<sup>12</sup> Pediatric intensivists have burnout rates of almost 80%, and a reference group of general pediatricians had an almost 30% rate of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization; this rate was lower for professional accomplishment.<sup>13</sup>

In a study of US surgeons, 40% of those responding were burned out, 30% screened positive for symptoms of depression, and 28% had a mental quality of life score greater than 1/2 standard deviation below the population norm.<sup>14</sup> Almost 50% of anesthesiologists scored positive for burnout domains in different surveys,

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