

## LIFE

## In search of satisfaction

PHYSICIAN  
TRENDS  
SURVEY

How  
physicians  
can improve  
their  
happiness

BY KATE KNEISEL

Physicians have love-hate relationships with their work. At least that's what results of the *Medical Post's* 2015 Canadian Physician Trends Survey show. The 1,003 Canadian doctor respondents were almost equally divided on whether they felt they had a better work-life balance than their parents did, and on whether medicine had affected their participation in family life. Yet, more than 80% said, if they had to do it all over again, they would still choose to become physicians. And 62% reported they would even encourage their children to enter the medical profession, an increase since 1994, when only 44% answered the same question in the affirmative in a similar *Medical Post* survey.

Clearly, physicians have conflicting feelings regarding their career satisfaction. So, what is at the root of the dichotomy? You might say they love their work but not the system that employs them—a topic the *Medical Post* explored in September when we looked at physicians' growing disillusionment with medicare due to the deleterious effects of administrative overload on their ability to provide patient care.

Many doctors spend upwards of 10 or more hours a day at the office or hospital, seeing patients, filling out forms and reviewing tests. And their inherent job satisfaction is suffering. "I generally feel overworked, drained and exhausted, mentally and physically," said Toronto physician Dr. James Kim, who practises in chronic pain management and has a wife and two kids. For busy doctors, it can be hard to find the time and energy for a personal life. However, controlling the work schedule, preventing work responsibilities from intruding on personal life, and taking some time off from the practice are all vital ways physicians can improve their happiness.

**Time for a life**

Dr. John McDonald has been a family physician in Paris, a small Ontario town, for more than 25 years. While he is quick to admit he still finds the job of helping people to be worthwhile and enjoyable, the stress of the system is ever present. "Granted, today's patients are at a higher level of acuity and there is much more chronic illness," he said. "But system stressors are 10 times what they used be." However, unlike in years past, Dr. McDonald said he is now usually able to make time for a life outside of medicine. "It has to be something you really strive for."

Guelph, Ont., respirologist Dr. Jackie Nemni, whose three children were all born during her five-year residency, has a similar attitude about work-life balance. "I always made it a priority to take days off for my kids' PA days or class trips," she said.

According to a cohort analysis of the 2007 and 2010 responses to the National Physician Survey (NPS), a periodic look at the medical profession in Canada, most physicians (approximately 80%) are generally satisfied with their professional life. Perhaps not surprisingly, reducing work hours and modifying scope of practice—goals identified by numer-



For Dr. Jackie Nemni of Guelph, Ont., "having my own office gives me more control over how I spend my time," she said, adding that annual family vacations help improve work-life balance. "The only caveat is that I make a lot less money."

ous NPS respondents over the past decade—appear to improve work-life balance.

The NPS results in regards to professional happiness are telling: Many of the physicians who were dissatisfied in 2007 who had achieved satisfaction by 2010 had reduced their hours of work per week, but only from 54 to 52 (their on-call hours per month also decreased, from 142 to 140). On the other side of the coin, those physicians whose overall satisfaction turned to dissatisfaction over the same three-year period saw their work load increase by two hours per week, with 78% of the group citing administrative work and paperwork as contributors.

This was spelled out in a July 2006 paper in the *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* by Dr. Rein Lepnum (DrPH) and colleagues at the University of Saskatchewan, who observed that, "The addition of administrative duties without a reduction of clinical duties compromised personal, professional and performance dimensions of career satisfaction." Reducing work hours, even slightly, appears to be the best approach to preserving job satisfaction in the current practice milieu.

**Take a break**

Physicians responding to the *Medical Post* survey took a mean of 32 vacation days per year. While the majority took breaks of a week or two throughout the year, almost 50% took individual days off during the week or tacked

onto weekends.

Dr. McDonald said that while practising in a small community requires him to respond to the needs of the day, he can modify his work to adjust to the amount of stress. "When I can, I take an occasional half-day off for a hobby or to spend time with family and friends." For Dr. Kim, the ideal vacation involves "a total escape with my family to a setting far removed from my work, and immersed in local culture." And while he does attend international conferences, he's different from many physicians who try to pair vacations with business, such as travelling for continuing medical education.

"We always took vacations as a family, even when we were broke," said Dr. Nemni. She finds getting away very restorative and has travelled extensively throughout her career. However, she speaks for several interviewees who have found combining CME with a family vacation less than rewarding. "I find myself divided between CME and family activities, so I usually keep them separate," she said. For his part, Dr. McDonald agreed. "Travelling for CME is OK, but people should be making sure they get a real vacation, because it's important to get away, even if you stay home," he said.

Indeed, like prioritizing personal life and reducing work hours, taking a proper vacation helps improve work-life balance. Ultimately, all these factors provide some measure of relief from the work-related stress plaguing MDs who otherwise do love their jobs. **MP**



Canadian physicians who agree that medicine has seriously affected their ability to be a good spouse and family caregiver:

1994:  
45%

2015:  
49%

Source: Medical Post 1994 International Survey of Doctors; Medical Post 2015 Canadian Physician Trends Survey