

SURGERY Synopsis

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CHAIR'S MESSAGE



Douglas E. Wood, MD,
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The Henry N. Harkins
Professor and Chair

“Work-life balance,” “stress,” and “burn-out” are terms that have become ubiquitous in articles, news stories or presentations about wellness among medical professionals. I chose to focus attention on this issue for a few reasons, but primarily because there is increasing data to support that a balanced, healthy life makes us better: better doctors, better staff, better parents and partners, and most of all, it provides us opportunity to be our best selves.

The concept of work-life balance is well-known to surgeons, their families, and those who work with surgeons but application and practice of this concept are spotty. The culture and traditions of Medicine and specifically Surgery are such that these medical professionals often feel they must out-perform and out-last peers, strive to set new standards in work output and outcomes, and generally be “perfect.” Formerly, surgeon leaders both nation-wide and at the local level did not often acknowledge or discuss topics such as “burnout,” with some perhaps considering the very discussion a sign of weakness, yet this was in the face of signs and consequences of burnout that were often apparent.

Over time, as awareness grew and a generation more cognizant of work-life balance entered surgical specialties, balance between life at work and life outside of work received greater attention, in part thanks to these younger surgeons who fearlessly raised these issues.

With the current research on burnout, job dissatisfaction, and physician suicide, it has become increasingly evident that if caregivers do not care for themselves they will also care less well for their patients. A quote from previous Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, superbly summarizes:

“I am particularly interested in how to cultivate emotional well-being for healthcare providers. If healthcare providers aren’t well, it’s hard for them to heal the people for whom they are caring. People think that emotional well-being is something that happens to you – things line up in your life, [you find] the right job, your health is good, and [you are in] a happy family and a good relationship.....but there is a growing body of science that tells us there are things we can do to develop our emotional well-being proactively, and that in turn can have a positive impact on our health.”
 – Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, MD, MBA April 2016.

As care providers, we know about the “Triple Aim” that is widely accepted as a compass to optimize health system

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performance: 1) Enhancing patient experience; 2) Improving population health; and 3) Reducing costs. I, along with a growing number of our fellow care-providers believe this should become a Quadruple Aim, with “Improving the work-life balance of healthcare providers” becoming a fourth, critical element.

How do we begin improving the work-life balance of healthcare providers? I was particularly taken with an article I read from the Mayo Clinic: “*The Secret of the Care of the Doctor is in Caring for the Doctor.*” Mayo Clin Proc. April 2016;91(4):408-410. The authors discuss levels of intervention for increasing wellness. The first is *Individual Intervention* – this has been the main focus until recently. This intervention would include the basics, such as eating, sleeping and exercising as well as cultivating self-awareness (which might include counseling and/or a coach). Taking up activities like mindfulness practice, and compassion cultivation as well as finding community – peer support or other groups – are all examples of individual intervention.

The next level of intervention is *Practice Environment*: making the clinic, department and institution a wellness-centered place to work. The third level of intervention is *Changing the System*. This is the hardest intervention to enact and will take concerted effort by many surgeons as individuals and by big professional organizations (among others) such as American College of Surgeons. There are many ideas for how to create change in each of these domains. I invite you to review a [slide deck](#) of a presentation I have given at numerous meetings regarding the importance of wellness.

I have long been an advocate for work-life balance; becoming Chair led me to more intense research in this area and instilled in me a determination of leading a Department focused on wellness and caring for its members—faculty, trainees and staff alike. To that end we have launched a Wellness Initiative

with the primary goal of improving individual wellness to inspire better patient care. Secondary goals are to: 1) promote rewarding work-life balance; 2) improve professional interactions; 3) sustain and energize morale; 4) build community; and 5) promote faculty satisfaction and retention.

Our first step will be a survey to all faculty, trainees and staff to assess interest and current wellness/satisfaction. This will be followed by a needs assessment that looks at exercise facilities, daycare, nutrition counseling, family life/work-life balance counseling, among others. To guide and promote this process, a faculty, resident and staff champions group will be created to lead these projects and promote wellness in the Department. And, we have created a staff FTE to support this important work.

Actions the Department will take and support are still emerging. At this point we propose to:

- Develop and support individualized goals since we know that activities that lead to wellness are highly individual
- Provide ideas and/or models of change
- Create policies and guidelines on issues of work-life balance, such as department-specific parental leave
- Create a department members only Website or FB (or other social media) platform
- Encourage sharing of goals, efforts and results – either openly or anonymously
- Institute a special Grand Rounds with a wellness focus along with seminars and discussions at internal department meetings
- Schedule Department-wide and Department + family group activities such as softball games, picnics, etc.

I should note that our first-ever annual “Carlos Pellegrini Summer Celebration

Day” will be held this July. The event is so named because Dr. Pellegrini has been such a champion of creating community within the Department.

All Department faculty, staff and trainees and their immediate family members will be invited. It is an outside “picnic” type celebration with food trucks, games and activities for children and adults, music and fun. We are delighted to begin this tradition.

Creating a climate of wellness is challenging, but important work. The group we are establishing to lead this charge are full of energy and are true champions of our goals. Our ultimate goal is to improve the health of our own Department; but along the way we want to also shine a light on the issue for other departments and institutions by presenting our work to UW Chairs, submitting peer-reviewed papers and presenting results at professional meetings. Not only do we want our own Department to be better, we want to help improve the health of the caregiving population. We will certainly reap the benefits in our personal lives, but care of the patient requires care of the provider – the fourth goal of our Quadruple Aim.

I hope you enjoy reading this issue of Surgery Synopsis, which is full of the interesting, recent activities and accomplishments of our Department members.

Sincerely,

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The Henry N. Harkins
Professor and Chair