

# Burnout a 'growing problem' for physician assistants

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More than one-third of physician assistants (PAs) meet criteria for burnout, suggests a study in the September issue of *JAAPA*, *Journal of the American Academy of PAs* (AAPA).

Burnout symptoms are key contributors to both depression and medical errors among PAs, according to the new research by Sarah R. Blackstone, Ph.D., MPH, of University of Virginia School of Medicine, Charlottesville, and colleagues. They write, "This study provides evidence supporting the need to address [burnout](#) in PAs, who continue to be of growing importance in the healthcare system." (At the time the study was performed, Dr. Blackstone was at James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Va.)

## **Burnout mediates depression's effects on professional outcomes in PAs**

In the survey study, 858 PAs completed the Stanford Professional Fulfillment Index, which assesses aspects of burnout (work exhaustion and interpersonal disengagement) along with professional fulfillment. Other assessments

included anxiety and depression, information on professional practice as a PA, and experience with medical errors.

Approximately 34 percent of PAs responding to the survey met criteria for burnout. Forty-six percent met criteria for work exhaustion and 30 percent for interpersonal disengagement. But despite these measures of burnout, more than half of PAs (53 percent) reported at least moderate levels of professional fulfillment.

"About six percent of PAs met criteria for depression: a lower rate than previously reported in physicians or in the general population. Thirteen percent had moderate to severe levels of anxiety. About 80 percent of PAs self-reported making at least one medical error during their careers."

Studies in physicians have shown a link between depression and burnout, with both factors negatively affecting performance including medical errors and patient outcomes. The researchers performed a series of "mediation analyses" to explore the interrelationships among burnout, depression, medical errors, and professional fulfillment among PAs.

The results suggested that the burnout symptoms of work exhaustion and interpersonal disengagement "fully mediated" the relationship between depression on the one hand and professional fulfillment on the other. "Burnout plays a stronger role in [job satisfaction](#) than symptoms of depression," the researchers write.

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