

# Alberta Doctors' Digest

## Letter to ADD re: physician burnout

Physician burnout – an interesting term when you take it apart. What drives it is what causes it.

The term burnout seems to suggest to me that one's method, one's approach to life itself is intrinsically sound but that the flood of circumstances and responsibilities has overwhelmed this otherwise sound paradigm. Physicians, for the most part, are and have always been over achievers, top 1% academics. Competitive by nature. These are character traits.

Where do they come from? What drives that?

I say, most physicians, me included, are driven by less than purely altruistic motives right from the start. As we come into our roles as physicians, that changes, of course. How could it not when we are tasked with one of the most rewarding jobs there is. The stream of humanity that passes through our fingers enlightens all but the most hardened to the true role a physician plays in the health of all.

But if one is blind to self or parts of self, guarded, driven by any form of shame and a schism or upheaval of some sort is not forthcoming, then look out. The crisis of mental illness looms. The surest and quickest way to hell is to avoid going there.

I'm 57 years old; 31 years a family physician. Remarried with two young boys. I have never been happier in my life. Never busier in my life and rarely do I feel something akin to burnout. I don't set boundaries much with patients, I simply have boundaries. I share my private life with my patients for a couple of reasons.

1. I have nothing to hide or am ashamed of.
2. I laugh at myself all the time.

I have, at any one time, at least five friends on speed dial, and always my wife, all who I speak with regularly, rehashing any conflict internal strife or negative emotional responses that I might experience. By the time I am telling something to the second or third one, I'm already seeing the lies I may be telling myself. And by the time I reach the fourth or fifth, I'm laughing at myself and so are they. When I make a mistake, I own it and make an amend but only when I truly have processed it and feel the internal change or resolve not to repeat it.

That is not how I was as a younger doctor or a med student or an undergrad. I was smart, self-centred, egotistical, competitive, emotionally blunted, hubristic.

I'm still a little touchy at times. I can still take it very seriously, when you don't take me seriously, not taking myself seriously. Awareness through years of mistakes was my path.

Let me just say, "I now know me, my peers know me, my friends know me, my wife and family know me." I know when I'm tired and get extra sleep. I always eat breakfast. I am

aware of and accept my limitations and blind spots when I come up against them. I have been practicing Judo for 47 years and still do Judo. I have hobbies and pursue them.

Yours,  
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Editors' note: If you also have some thoughts you'd like to share in response to this special issue of *Alberta Doctors' Digest*, [please let us know](#).

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