

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Understanding substance use disorder in physicians

Did you know that substance use disorders (SUD) are not uncommon in physicians? In fact, the prevalence among physicians is thought to be equal to that in the general population. In a survey of American physicians, about 15% had scores consistent with alcohol abuse or dependence, with female physicians showing higher rates than males.

The good news is effective treatment for SUD exists, and the AMA's Physician and Family Support Program (PFSP) can help by providing support, discussing treatment options and assisting with access to treatment.

Substance use disorder is a treatable medical condition that can have serious effects on a physician's health, relationships and career. Prevention, early detection, good treatment, follow-up and safe medication management can all contribute to better outcomes. Early identification of the affected individual can often prevent harm, both to the physician and the patients they are treating.

Treating SUD

Anyone who has concerns about their use of an addictive substance is encouraged to talk to a health care professional or to call the PFSP assistance line (1.877.767.4637). If there is a diagnosis of SUD, they should seek treatment appropriate to the severity of the condition and to their profession. As the practice of medicine is safety sensitive, recommended treatment is more intensive than for the general population.

Physicians with SUD have greater success when treated in facilities with experience in, and specific programs for, treating health care professionals. With this type of treatment and appropriate follow-up, physicians with SUD have an excellent prognosis. PFSP can assist physicians in accessing this specialized treatment.

We understand that physicians may be reluctant to seek treatment. The barriers include stigma, fear of regulatory bodies, and financial impact. While this reluctance is understandable, it's helpful to know that about 95% of physicians who seek treatment return to practice in good health.

Rest assured, your confidentiality is respected

Naturally, AMA's physician members are curious about how PFSP maintains confidentiality. Physicians can rest assured that all services on the PFSP assistance line are provided by contractors who are external to the program and to the AMA. When you contact the PFSP assistance line, your identity and any other personal information you provide is known only to the contracted assistance-line operator and the assessment physician on-call.

All information collected through the PFSP toll-free assistance line is non-identifiable by PFSP/AMA and is held confidential. Calls to the PFSP line and referrals to our therapists are not documented in the provincial electronic health record. For those physicians who request a higher level of assistance and decide to take advantage of our case coordination service, it may be necessary for PFSP to share some limited information with other parties such as treatment programs. In this case, information is shared only with the physician's informed consent.

If you have any concern about substance use or other mental health conditions, please give us a call. There is no reason to wait.

Resources

PFSP facilitates treatment for Alberta physicians. Call 1.877.767.4637 (24/7) for more information.

If you have any questions about how PFSP maintains confidentiality, please reach out to us at 403.228.2880. You can also read our [privacy commitment](#) on the AMA website.

Healthy working environments

The AMA is committed to working with and for physicians to address system issues that impede attaining a safe, healthy, equitable working environment.

Psycho-social wellness and safety is one of three factors that enable healthy working environments. The AMA's approach to psycho-social wellness and safety includes shared accountability when it comes to physician wellness.

We know that when physicians are healthy and well, they have a greater capacity for resilience. They are able to function optimally in providing effective, empathetic care and are more able to collaborate with teams in civil, compassionate and insightful ways. That is why the AMA is dedicated to supporting physician wellness. Click the links below to learn more.

[Healthy Working Environments](#) A new AMA initiative that focuses on working with and for physicians to address system issues which impede attaining a safe, healthy and equitable working environment.

[Physician and Family Support Program](#) Confidential support and help with personal health issues, which enhance the quality of patient care and public safety by promoting health and well-being for the medical profession that cares for all Albertans.

[Well Doc Alberta](#) An initiative aimed at advancing a collaborative, co-operative, pan-provincial approach to physician wellness. Well Doc's work is focused on education and prevention, is supported by the science of physician wellness, and is driven by need.

References available upon request.

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