

## *Doctors Fighting the Stigma*

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In most states in the U.S., doctors are required to fill out forms detailing their past mental health conditions. Recently, physicians have been arguing that this makes them feel like they have to hide their conditions to keep their jobs, which prevents them from getting proper treatment. They fear that they will be treated differently or fired by their employers.

Doctors have a reputation of not having emotions, which has led to the stigma around doctors receiving treatment. According to the American Medical Association (AMA), a 2021 study found that 62.8% of physicians had symptoms of burnout, which include exhaustion and depersonalization. With such high numbers of doctors dealing with burnout or living with a mental health illness, it is crucial for physicians to get treatment without jeopardizing their jobs.

A study done by Mental Health America of healthcare workers found that “93% of health care workers were experiencing stress, 86% reported experiencing anxiety, 77% reported frustration, 76% reported exhaustion and burnout, and 75% said they were overwhelmed.” Health care workers are at a higher risk of suicide than other workers, especially after COVID-19. There have been several highly publicized stories of health care workers who have died by suicide, which has increased public awareness of the stigma doctors face. Dr. Lorna Breen was one such doctor who died in 2020, at the time when hospitals were completely overwhelmed with patients. She called her sister and was checked into a psychiatric ward, but was convinced that her career was ruined because she admitted to struggling with her mental health. She died on April 26, 2020. Breen’s family has said that if the culture were different, then she would not have considered suicide.

In an effort to address the stigma, Massachusetts recently announced that their hospitals and health insurance companies will no longer require doctors to disclose their past mental health and substance use conditions. Physicians will only be required to mention current conditions that may impact their performance.

This is also being done in more than two dozen other states. The American Medical Association has asked for forms to remove questions from forms that may stop doctors from seeking treatment. The National Committee for Quality Assurance has stopped requiring health plans to ask clinicians about past drug use. These are all huge steps towards reducing the stigma.

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