Engaging Physicians in “Experience”

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The Many Dangers Posed by Burned-Out Doctors
By Chase Schonbaum | August 23, 2012

Is your doctor suffering? Do the symptoms include cynicism, emotional exhaustion, or viewing patients as objects rather than people? He or she may be experiencing burnout. In fact, there’s a 50 percent chance that any doctor is—a rate 10 percent higher than among the general population of working people.

The first nationwide study of burnout among doctors in the U.S. offered that grim diagnosis this week. The authors, led by Tait D. Shanafelt of the Mayo Clinic, reported their findings in the Archives of Internal Medicine. About 46 percent of the 7,200 doctors surveyed showed at least one symptom of this condition, described as an “erosion of the soul” in the book, The Truth About Burnout.

For decades, mounting research has confirmed that doctors are not well. Many are stressed out, drug-addicted, depressed and—as Bloomberg Businessweek recently noted—angry. Burnout can bring on those conditions, Shanafelt says. “Some physicians may cope with their distress by using alcohol,” he says, “or by giving less...