

# Reducing stress in a clinical practice

## Can a scribe help?

BY KEVIN DONNELLY, MD

Apparently, physician burnout looks just like me. I am a 54-year-old family physician in Saint Cloud. My negative attitude was hidden from my patients but was noted by co-workers and led to a solution that worked for me—and helped me regain not only time with my patients but the joy of being a physician.

The rapid changes in health care practice put a strain on all physicians. We are pulled in many different directions during our busy days so that staying focused on our patients is harder.

I remember fondly the days of dictating notes that were typed in excellent fashion by transcriptionists. The notes were easy to read and rarely had errors. As computers arrived, we were asked to try Dragon transcription or to simply type and edit notes ourselves.

In my physician-owned primary care clinic, more sacrifices followed. To pay for the computers and the electronic record, we needed to reduce overhead, so transcriptionists were slowly eliminated, resulting in much lower quality notes. I was embarrassed to read my notes or those of colleagues that were much less detailed than they had previously been and littered with errors.

Although making clear and complete records of our interactions with patients is clearly important to the practice of medicine, I was frustrated by the increasing requirements on me—and the increasing limits on my time, both with patients and in my personal life.

I was approached by one of our lead physicians and the administrator seeking a way to help me by offering use of a scribe. My mood had become enough of a

problem that I was moved ahead of other physicians who wanted a scribe. I am not advocating grumpiness as a way to get ahead, but I did say yes.

Since April 2018, I have been working with a tele-scribe living in Miami whom I wheel into the room on an iPad. With the scribe taking notes, I'm able to focus my attention on the patient and their concerns in the moment. When I am in the room now, I am fully attentive to my patient and no longer focused on data entry. Listening and problem-solving are what I am trained to do—and what give me joy and purpose.

There are physicians who are much more adept at typing and use of Dragon than myself, so a scribe may not be right for them. Having a scribe does not mean I stop typing, editing and using Dragon as I finalize the notes the scribe has prepared, but I would estimate my end-of-the-day documentation has dropped by 25 percent. With our tele-scribe system, an experienced scribe works with new scribes before they “enter” the practice setting. Our previously physician-owned practice is now part of a larger health system, which covers the cost of the tele-scribe.

Do patients want us to be transcriptionists and data entry clerks? Or do they want us to focus our full attention and mental efforts on their health and health concerns? The answer is obvious.

But equally important, when we find ways to reduce even a small amount of the administrative stresses in our work, we can remember just why it is we went into medicine—and how much joy it brings us as we interact with and help our patients. **MM**

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