Practice what you preach: Physicians need to attend to their own health, well-being before they can expect patients to do the same
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Practice what you preach
Physicians need to attend to their own health, well-being before they can expect patients to do the same

from the AAP Section on Complementary and Integrative Medicine

Interest in physician health and wellness is gathering momentum nationally and internationally. Long considered taboo due to the inference that physicians might be impaired, vulnerable or not up to the demands of their heavy workload, physician wellness now is being approached in a more straightforward way. Emphasis is on the importance of preventive health from medical school through retirement.

Adding to the timeliness of the topic is research demonstrating that physicians who are knowledgeable about healthy lifestyle habits, and able to relate their own activities and challenges, have patients who are more successful in adopting their suggestions. This seems especially relevant to pediatricians, who can convey the importance of healthy lifestyle choices from the beginning of a child’s life.

History of physician wellness in the AAP
Hanna Sherman, M.D., FAAP, founding chair of the Special Interest Group in Physician Health and Wellness, authored a proposal, endorsed at the Annual Leadership Forum, for AAP policy to promote physician health and wellness. Her call for interested members caught the attention of Hilary McClafferty, M.D., FAAP, a member of the AAP Section on Complementary and Integrative Medicine Executive Committee. Dr. McClafferty, who took over as SIG chair in 2010, and Michelle Bailey, M.D., FAAP, are collaborating on the policy statement.

Drs. McClafferty and Bailey both are graduates of the Fellowship in Integrative Medicine through the University of Arizona, and share a longstanding interest in physician health and wellness.

“The mission of the American Academy of Pediatrics is to attain optimal physical, mental and social health and well-being for all infants, children, adolescents and young adults,” Dr. Bailey said. “How could we expect anything less of ourselves?”

Personal perspectives
Drs. McClafferty and Bailey experienced opportunities during their integrative medicine fellowship training to evaluate and modify their own health while learning to help others do the same. It was the first time in many years that either had taken stock of their health, and it was eye-opening for each to realize how out of balance they had become.

Dr. Bailey struggled with the question of how could she ask families of obese patients in the Duke Children’s Healthy Lifestyle Program to attend to areas of their life that she herself wasn’t ready or willing to address. Dr. McClafferty experienced an epiphany when she spent six months at home caring for her son, who had become critically ill during her integrative medicine training. The time to reflect helped her realize how far her life had slipped out of balance without her realizing it.

Both spoke with colleagues about their insights and found a common theme: the difficulty of taking care of oneself while meeting responsibilities as professional caretakers.

Dr. Bailey, director of medical education at Duke Integrative Medicine, has acted on her interests in physician health by leading the development of educational offerings for medical students and residents on mind-body skills and the importance of physician self-care. The program is being expanded to all Duke residents and will include an online curriculum. She plans to develop an educational offering for practicing physicians in the community and at academic medical centers.

Dr. McClafferty transitioned from pediatric emergency medicine to an evidence-based integrative medicine consult practice, where she developed a clinical model to work with adult and pediatric patients to improve their health and make effective lifestyle changes. She will begin as assistant director of the Fellowship in Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona in April, and is committed to
continuing to promote the importance of physician health and wellness.

“The parallels between physician health and integrative medicine seem intuitive to me,” Dr. McClafferty said. “It is a logical and comprehensive way to approach the health of very hard-working, complex and intelligent professionals. We need to look out for each other as physicians, not just as pediatricians, across the entire medical community. An integrative medicine approach provides an effective template to do this.”

Both emphasize approaching health in a comprehensive way, considering exercise, dietary supplements, spirituality, social support, sleep and mind-body connection along with conventional medicine concerns.

“My sincere hope is that as pediatricians begin to better attend to their own health, it will translate into better health for the children and families that we serve,” Dr. Bailey said. “Let us all strive for optimal health and wellness and model this for the pediatric community and beyond.”
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