

Physician Sentiment Survey 2022

Key factors shaping the physician experience

Introduction

Is physician burnout still on the rise? How do physicians feel about their ability to provide quality care? And is technology making their jobs easier by enabling critical healthcare connections?

To learn more about the various factors impacting the physician experience, athenahealth commissioned an online survey, conducted by The Harris Poll, of 743 practicing physicians from January 4-26, 2022. All respondents work a minimum of 20 hours per week, but they practice in a variety of settings under different compensation models and use a variety of electronic health record (EHR) vendors.

In addition to the surveys, 15 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted among survey respondents who agreed to be recontacted for additional questions. The findings in this report are based on both quantitative and qualitative insights.

There are several bright spots in the physician experience

To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (% Agree or Strongly agree)

My organization/practice **recognizes my contribution** to its success.

78%

I am **very likely to be working for my current organization** 3 years from now.

76%

I believe we will **achieve a more wholly connected healthcare system** during my career.

65%

I have the time and support to go above and beyond what is required of me in the context of my job.

63%

Despite positivity, physicians continue to struggle with feelings of burnout and isolation

In the past year, how often did you feel each of the following? (% Once a week or more)

Rushed, not having enough time to spend with my patients.

68%

Overwhelmed by administrative requirements and burdens.

63%

Frustrated by the challenges of accessing clinical information about my patients.

59%

Burned out from my work.

49%

A sense of isolation in my professional life.

40%

Overall, physician sentiment on the future of healthcare in the U.S. is mixed, with **48% optimistic** and **52% pessimistic**.

Key finding #1:

Unsustainable workloads — exacerbated by the staffing crisis and administrative burden — are leading to physician burnout

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the staffing challenges that dominated the healthcare industry in 2021 emerged as a leading contributor to physician burnout, according to physicians surveyed. Physician respondents report that the top two factors contributing to burnout are excessive documentation requirements (57%) and staffing challenges (51%), including retention shortages and lack of qualified personnel.

Staffing shortages are impacting physician sentiment and ability to provide excellent care

Physicians identify the staffing crisis as the top issue impacting their organization (80%), followed by staff retention (60%). Respondents identified various challenges throughout the hiring process, ranging from finding the right candidates to getting them to show for an interview.

Physicians are feeling the impact of being short-staffed. Fewer staff translates to a higher patient volume per physician, leaving many feeling rushed and overwhelmed — 44% say their daily workload is unsustainable.

Practices are addressing high patient volumes with varying strategies. Some are trying to squeeze in more patients but offering physicians scribes to increase visit efficiency or enabling physicians to delegate initial patient intake. Others are choosing to adjust appointment volumes instead, removing a slot around lunch to ensure physicians have time to decompress and catch up on charting.

The administrative burden continues to increase stress

In addition to increased patient volume and staffing shortages, physicians report struggling with the seemingly endless volume of administrative tasks they must complete. Most physicians (91%) believe the burden of regulatory requirements are getting worse, adding tasks — and time — to documentation processes.

The administrative burden takes time away from patient care and adds significant stress — 63% of physicians feel overwhelmed by administrative requirements on a weekly basis. Yet nearly three-quarters (72%) of physicians say their organization is not set up to minimize the time they spend on administrative tasks in order for them to focus on patient care.

3 in 4 organizations have not taken steps to reduce burnout

Despite pervasive feelings of stress, fatigue, and burnout, most physicians report that their organizations have not taken steps to reduce burnout within the past year. In the absence of action at the organizational level, most of the responsibility for managing burnout falls to the individual physician — adding yet another burden.

74%

say their organization has not taken steps to decrease physician burnout in the last 12 months.

When organizations do take steps to reduce burnout — like improving working conditions and minimizing the administrative burden — there are significant, far-reaching impacts. Physicians who work at organizations that have made an effort to mitigate burnout report feeling overwhelmed less often, less likely to feel they have an unsustainable workload, and more likely to say their EHR helps reduce the time they spend on administrative tasks, the survey found.

Key finding #2:

Information sharing challenges create gaps in the patient story and contribute to physician stress

Lack of visibility surrounding patient information is also top of mind for many survey respondents. Physicians report difficulty accessing patient records from visits, tests, or procedures done outside of their own EHR system.

66%

say sharing patient data with another provider within my EHR network is easy.

24%

say sharing patient data with a provider using a different EHR is easy.

Better patient data sharing would improve quality of care

Challenges with data sharing have the potential to impact patient outcomes and patient satisfaction. Physicians need a holistic view of the patient, from longer-term history (surgical history, chronic conditions, etc.) to recent information (primary care diagnoses, lab work, patient goals, etc.) to make the best possible decisions about their care. But they often don't have access to all the information they need from other providers or labs, and patients range in their ability to fill the gaps.

These knowledge gaps — “holes” in the patient story — are incredibly frustrating for physicians. Eight in 10 physicians (80%) say the inability to share data between information systems increases their stress levels.

The inefficiencies mean that physicians cannot always focus on the big picture. They often spend a lot of time tracking down missing information about patients — time that could otherwise be spent engaged in direct patient care.

What some physicians say they need most when entering the exam room is “high yield” information about the patient: a quick summary of their most recent diagnoses, medications, reason for visit, and so on. Without better data sharing, this type of summary feels like wishful thinking.

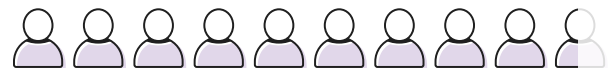
Physicians believe the industry will become more connected, but acknowledge barriers

Physicians are split on what they believe the future of information sharing will look like. Most remain optimistic (65%) that a more wholly connected healthcare system will be achieved at some point during their career, but they simultaneously acknowledge that there are many barriers to making that vision reality. Whether they're optimistic or not, most physicians agree that greater connectivity would improve their ability to provide high-quality care.

Improved data connectivity between information systems can enhance...

94%

patient outcomes



91%

the overall physician experience



Key finding #3:

Physicians say technology is vital to their success, but there's still room for improvement

Physicians largely recognize the power of technology, but many struggle with information overload. The sheer volume of information available at any given moment can make their jobs more difficult, and the task of managing that data is putting additional strain on physicians. In fact, 58% of physicians surveyed say they often feel so overloaded with information that it increases their stress levels.



Sometimes my EHR gives me an encyclopedia and all I really need is a dictionary.

Primary care provider

Data quality matters much more than quantity

As physicians grapple with information load, 89% of respondents agree that more clinical data isn't always the answer; the right data at the right time is most important.

There's a significant opportunity here for technology to evolve to better meet physicians' needs. When asked what they thought would have the greatest impact in their ability to provide higher-quality patient care, physicians' number one recommendation is the ability to easily find clinical data when they need it. Additionally, 90% of physicians say that better data about their patients would give them more confidence in their ability to support patients' needs.

Managing patient expectations around communication is another pain point

Technology has improved communication between patients and physicians, but adoption of technology like patient portals has also increased workload demands. It's easier than ever for patients to access their physician and ask questions about ongoing care, but physicians report that the sheer volume of messages is overwhelming.

Very few practices have a process in place for sharing the responsibility of follow-up — organizational practices have not evolved at the same rate as technology. In the absence of dedicated administrative time during the day, many physicians say they need to work after hours to respond to patient messages, adding to burnout.

Physicians point out what works and what doesn't with current technology systems

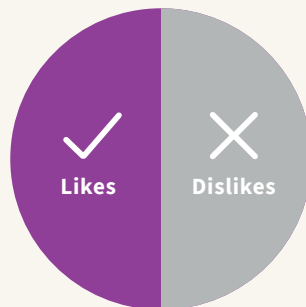
Internal Communications



Ease of use / efficiency
(use of templates, user interface)



Routine tasks
Billing, health maintenance reminders, forms



External communications / receiving patient data



Information management



Lack of know-how / training

Technology can help physicians manage their workload and provide high-quality care

There is a long road ahead for the healthcare system, but physicians say technology will play an essential role. Two-thirds (66%) of physicians believe technology helps them manage their patient workload, and 63% believe technology enhances their doctor-patient relationships. Perhaps most important of all, 71% of physicians believe their EHR helps them to provide high-quality care.

Conclusion

The survey underscores that both physicians' current sentiment and outlook on the future of the industry are mixed.

There are clear challenges across the board, particularly regarding staffing shortages, administrative burden, and the ability to access and use patient data efficiently. While these challenges largely predate the pandemic, they have certainly been exacerbated by the pressures and time demands of the ongoing crisis.

Despite the pain points, it's important to note that the majority of physicians continue to find meaning in their invaluable, essential work.

