

# Doctor “Burnout”:

Navigating Moral Injury in Medicine

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No financial disclosures

# Physician Support Line

Free Confidential Peer Support Line by  
Volunteer Psychiatrists Helping our US Physician Colleagues  
Navigate the Many Intersections of Our Personal and  
Professional Lives

**1-888-409-0141**

**7 days a week  
8am - 1am ET**

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# What's in a name?

- Defining (and Redefining):
  - Burn Out
  - Self Care
  - Moral Injury

# Burnout

- Definition: constellation of symptoms – “malaise, fatigue, frustration, cynicism, inefficiency” that arise from “making excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources” in the workplace.
- Definition transferred from other fields, their solutions did not

# A Closer Look

Burn out indicates:

- Internal problems of regulating emotion
- Impetus on the individual to come up with solution
- Which then leads to suggestions of...

# “Self Care”

- Often described as:
  - Taking breaks, vacations
  - Comfort food
  - Spa day
  - Etc.
  
- Well meaning, superficially addresses the pain, not the cancer

# Moral Injury

- First described in armed services returning from Vietnam
  - Deep emotional residue from the war, but not following PTSD criteria
  - Emotions were not due to imminent anxiety of mortality (PTSD)
  - But due to anxiety about morality (Moral Injury)
    - “Following Orders”
    - “I did things you wouldn’t believe”

# Moral Injury in Healthcare

- Occurs when we perpetrate, bear witness, or fail to prevent an act that transgresses our moral beliefs
- Healthcare is not just a job/profession.
- Our “job contract” is the Hippocratic Oath.
  - Put the patient first
- But practically and clinically, it has become much more complicated

# The Stakeholders

- The patient
- The EMR
- The insurers
- Pharmaceuticals
- The hospital
- The healthcare system
- Financial security (loans)
- Time, uncertainty, our own mortality

# The Scapegoat

- The physician:
  - Inadvertently represents to the patient all of these things coming in the way of their health
  - → internalization

***“Moral injury describes the challenge of simultaneously knowing what care patients need but being unable to provide it due to constraints that are beyond our control”***

*- Wendy Dean, MD et al*

# Reframing

- Burn out: due to a broken individual. “You are not cut out to be a doctor”
- Moral Injury: due to a broken system. “The job is doing you and the patient a disservice”

# Problem Solving

- Managing psychological injuries:
  - Guilt/Shame
  - Anger/resentment
- Managing systemic injuries:

# Psychological Injuries

- Role of the individual:
  - Accepting that these are normal reactions to being put in a helpless situation
  - Understanding that having these hard emotions serve a purpose: reminder that we still have a moral compass
  - Understanding discomfort bring about change

# Forgiveness of the Self

- “Inner reconciliation where one acknowledges and makes amends for harm done, while also accepting the self as a fallible person engaged in continued moral growth”
- Needs:
  - Time – not linear process
  - Deliberation and volition
  - Reconciliation
  - Acceptance

# Systemic Reform

- **Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation**
  - Legislative initiative to federally fund access and support of medical professionals seeking mental health care, including hospital credentialing barriers.
- **Humans Before Heroes Initiative (AMWA collab)**
  - Reframing mental health questions on state medical licensing applications to distinguish illness vs. impairment

# Lessons from the Physician Support Line

- Lessons we are learning through callers:
  - What physicians expect of themselves
  - What patients expect of them
  - What family/friends expect of them
  - What society expects of them
    - → internalization of these expectations at the cost of your own wellness
- Hippocratic Oath is about duty towards your patient. But not at your self sacrifice

***You Don't Have to Set Yourself  
On Fire to Keep Others Warm***

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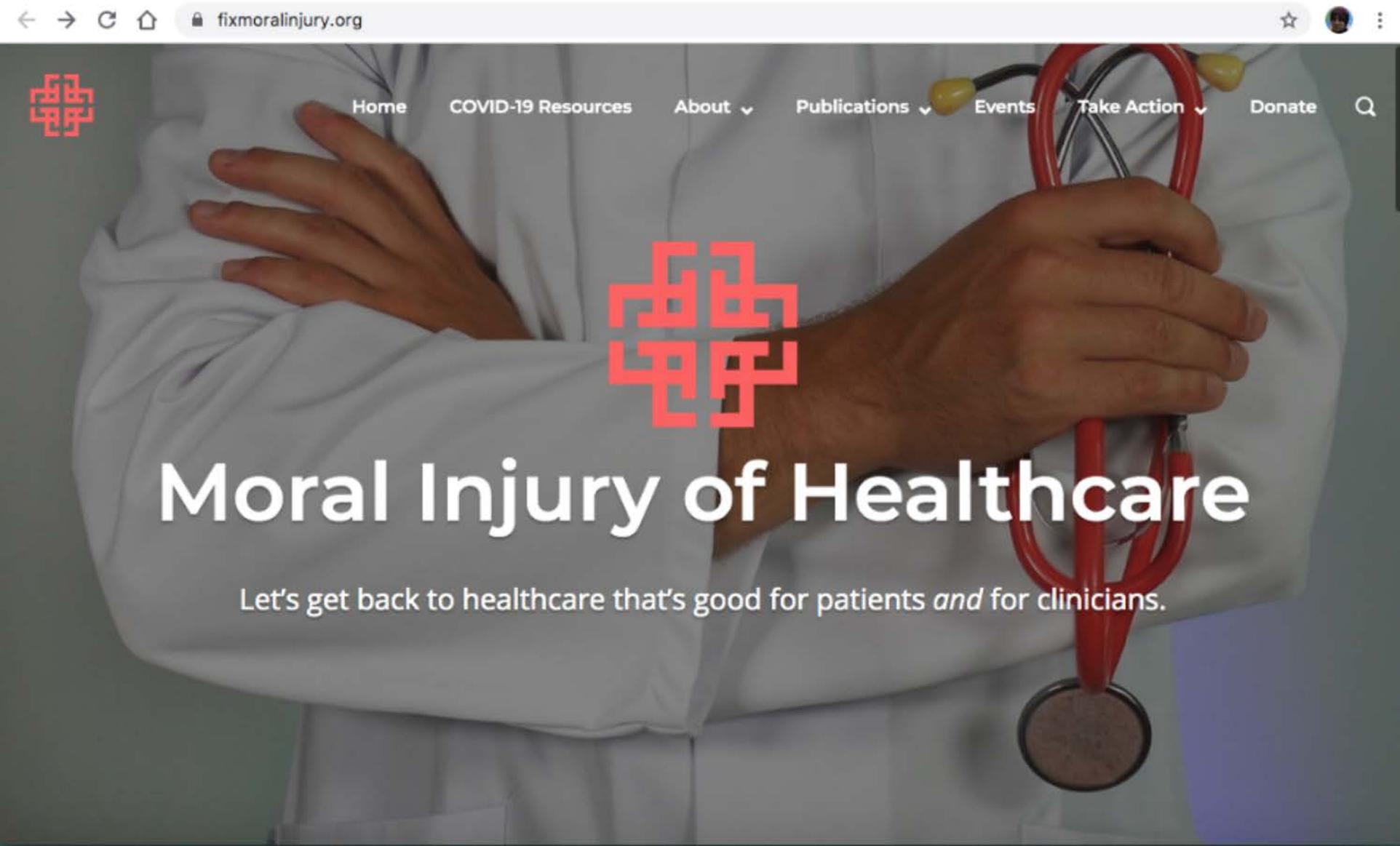
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Please visit [fixmoralinjury.org](http://fixmoralinjury.org) organized by Dr. Dean and Dr. Talbot for resources including literature and toolkits on this subject



fixmoralinjury.org

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# Moral Injury of Healthcare

Let's get back to healthcare that's good for patients *and* for clinicians.

# References:

- Dean W, Talbot S. Physicians aren't "burning out." They're suffering from moral injury. STAT. Jul 26, 2018. [Accessed April, 6 2020]. <https://www.statnews.com/2018/07/26/physicians-not-burning-out-they-are-suffering-moral-injury/>
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