

INTRODUCTION

Burnout has been described as a syndrome of depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and a sense of low personal accomplishment and has been associated with absenteeism, low job satisfaction, and medical errors among physicians-in-training.^{1,2} A current leading tool for the definition of burnout is the Maslach Burnout Inventory, which has been validated among physicians.³ It consists of a three part definition of burnout consisting primarily of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy or loss of a personal sense of accomplishment.⁴ While all three domains play a role in this definition of burnout, However, Maslach and colleagues have shown that the domain of personal accomplishment may be excluded from the diagnostic criteria and several authors in the field have begun to do this.^{5,6}

Burnout has been shown to affect all tiers of the medical professional system, from first-year medical students to practicing physicians. Estimates of burnout prevalence among U.S. medical students range from 43-45%.^{7,8} Among graduate medical residents, burnout estimates range from 40-76%.^{1,9-13} Practicing specialists and general practitioners have estimates from 22-60%, while family medicine physicians have the highest estimates of 56-80%.^{1,14-17}

To our knowledge it has never been explored in a premedical education population. The question becomes “at what point does physician burnout begin?” Could burnout be an entity that begins before the burgeoning physician even enters medical school? How does the prevalence of premedical student burnout compare to non-premedical college students? This study sought to publish the first estimate of burnout in premedical students attending a major university.

METHODS

The design was a cross sectional survey of undergraduate students at Texas A&M University. The team sought and gained approval via the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M Health Science Center for the study. We then contacted the Office of Student Affairs at Texas A&M University to get permission to email the student body and to determine which students were currently enrolled in the pre-medical pathway. The survey was mailed out at the beginning of the school year to all levels of student from freshmen to senior.

The electronic survey was emailed to the entire student body (n= 50,054) in August-September 2012. This timing was in an attempt to determine the change in burnout, if any, in the premedical students as they advanced through their education. This also allowed the team to avoid end of semester finals or midterms. The survey consisted of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, Human Services Survey version (MBI-HSS), and demographic questions such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, county/state of adolescence, major and intent on medical career, grade point average, and current year in school. All participating students were incentivized to respond by being offered online college study techniques and speed reading videos thought to appeal to a wide audience.

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