Having Each Other’s Backs
Breaking the silence on physician suicide and fostering a collegial environment
Joanna Barreiro, MD, Adam Was, MD, and Angelica Mancone, MD.

Prevalence
- It is estimated that 300-400 physicians die by suicide per year, or a doctor a day, although the exact incidence is unknown.
- The suicide rate among physicians is higher compared to the general population—1.41 for males and 2.27 for females.¹
- The prevalence of depression/depressive symptoms in residents is 28.8% and increases during residency.²
- 9.4% of fourth-year medical students reported having suicidal thoughts in the previous two weeks.³

Contributing factors
- Threats to professional life (i.e., status, autonomy, security), financial instability, increased workload.⁴
- Job-specific: long work hours, lack of support from superiors, poor patient outcomes, decreased autonomy, workplace criticism, and lack of access to support systems.

Suicide Warning Signs⁵

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>Themes about killing themselves, hopelessness, lack of reason to live, being a burden, pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>Increased substance use, interest in lethal means, withdrawing, isolating, change in sleep, saying goodbye, giving away belongings, aggression, fatigue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood</td>
<td>Depression, suicide, apathy, irritability, shame, anger, relief (sudden improvement in mood)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Changes in behavior or development of new behaviors are most concerning if linked to the occurrence of an adverse event.

What to do if you are concerned that a colleague is suicidal⁶
- Talk in private: ask directly if suicidal, listen to colleague, avoid debating, minimizing, or giving advice. Tell colleague that you care and encourage seeking help. *Assume you are the only one doing this!*
- If you believe your colleague is suicidal, stay with them, avoid lethal means, and get help/escort to care.

Mental health support and suicide prevention resources
- 988 – Suicide and crisis lifeline, routes callers to the National Suicide Prevention line. 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
- HEAR Program – Anonymous, confidential questionnaire, followed by counselor involvement. UC San Diego HEAR Program
- Learn at ACGME – Collection of resources selected within GME standards to support well-being. ACGME Well-Being
- Physician Support Line – Free and confidential support line for physicians and medical students. Physician Support Line

Interventions to foster a supportive, nurturing, and collegial environment
- Collegial work environment: First name basis, empower junior physicians, encourage collaboration, establish mentorship programs.
- Support after adverse events: Conduct team debriefs and make resources available.
- Wellness: Encourage outside hobbies, counseling, and exercise; designate “wellness champions” to support mental health.
- Conduct recurring education on suicide and mental health interventions.
- Develop mental health-related crises plans, including death by suicide.

References