



Getting Help from the Physicians Health Program

The Physicians Health Program was started by the Tennessee Medical Association more than 20 years ago. For the first 10 years, most of the physicians assisted had problems with either alcohol or drug dependency.

Expanded Scope

Due to requests by physician groups, hospitals and families, the program has expanded its scope of services considerably over the last ten years. Roland W. Gray, M.D., Physicians Health Program Medical Director, says that in addition to dealing with alcohol and drug dependency, the program now assists many physicians who have disruptive behavior, boundary violation issues, psychiatric disorders, improper prescribing, stress, and career burn-out issues. "Since our beginning, we have assisted more than 2,800 physicians and their families in Tennessee," said Dr. Gray.

"When a physician is referred to us, frequently we see only a symptom of their underlying disorder, whether the problem be alcohol, drug dependency, disruptive behavior, psychiatric disorders or stress," Dr. Gray continued. Dr. Gray stressed that "our goal is to rehabilitate and assist physicians in all areas of their lives."

Underlying Factors

Physicians often believe that problems such as depression, boundary issues, career burn-out, etc. should not affect them. After all, how could so much medical training not enable them to care for themselves? Dr. Gray explained that most of the issues he deals with today have always been there, but a new environment provided the right circumstance for problems to rise to the surface. "There is no question that physicians are under considerably more stress than was present 20 years ago. This stress escalated due to changes in the healthcare industry over the last two decades," he said. Most physicians would cite malpractice stress, inadequate reimbursement, long work hours and intense oversight by numerous government agencies as issues that sometimes prevent them from practicing medicine the way they always believed they could. All of these issues contribute to a stressful environment ripe for potential problems.

Letting go of Fear

Many physicians are still unclear about the mission of the Physicians Health Program in Tennessee. Dr. Gray emphasized that the Physicians Health Program has never been involved in disciplinary action against physicians. "The program is available to assist physicians who are going through disciplinary actions by outside parties. Our role is to serve as an advocate for physicians in Tennessee," he said. "Fortunately, more physicians come to us today through self-referral," Dr. Gray continued. There should be no fear on the part of self-referred physicians that they will be labeled "impaired." This is far from the truth. All program referrals and records are kept strictly confidential.

Also unclear to many physicians, is the relationship between the Physicians Health Program and the Board of Medical Examiners, SVMIC and other insurance carriers. Dr Gray clarified the relationships to reduce unnecessary worries. "The Board of Medical Examiners relies on the program to give guidance and to advocate for physicians who appear before them. Once a physician enters our program, and follows our suggested course of assistance, we are available to provide the advocacy they need when dealing with outside bodies such as the BME," he stated. SVMIC and other insurers also look to the program for advice and advocacy for physicians who have been involved in disciplinary actions or have undergone treatment for alcohol and drug dependency, disruptive behavior, boundary issues, psychiatric disorders and improper prescribing.

Dr. Gray ended by saying, "I would like to emphasize that we are here to support and assist physicians and their families in whatever areas of their life they are having difficulty."

Physicians can easily access the TMF Physicians Health Program by calling (615) 467-6411 or writing the TMF, 216 Centerview Drive, Suite 304, Nashville, TN, 37027. All communications to the program are strictly confidential.

To make a tax deductible contribution to the Physicians Health Program, contact TMF Administrator Michael Todd at (615) 467-6411 or write to the Tennessee Medical Foundation, 216 Centerview Drive, Suite 304, Brentwood, TN 37027