

Physicians Health Program Message

PHP: Rescuing the Wounded Healer – Pt. I

By Roland W. Gray, MD



Doctors are no different than anyone else.

We laugh, we cry, we love; we eat, sleep and drink; we work hard and get stressed out; and sometimes when the pressure and stress is too much, we don't handle it very well. Like anyone else, we can turn the pressure inward and suffer anxiety, depression, or other emotional ills, or medicate our troubles with drugs and alcohol. Or we can turn the pressure outward and take it out on our colleagues, our subordinates, our patients, and even our families.

But unlike many people, doctors are in a unique position to do harm – our troubles can impact the very lives of the people we are entrusted to take care of.

ABOUT THE PHP

In 1978, the Tennessee Medical Association created the Impaired Physician Peer Review Committee to address this problem. Almost 30 years later, the effort has become a full-fledged, nationally-known program to rescue these wounded healers. Now known as the Physicians Health Program (PHP) under the direction of the Tennessee Medical Foundation (TMF), the ultimate goals are to protect patients by identifying and intervening with these physicians, and to protect impaired physicians from themselves by offering rehabilitation, treatment and advocacy in an effort to restore them to wholeness. The mission of the PHP was inspired by my predecessor, Dr. David Dodd, who served as medical director for 17 years. When I succeeded Dr. Dodd in 2002, the PHP had expanded its scope beyond chemical addiction to a broad range of behavioral problems and our services are still expanding today.

In 2005, the PHP worked with 196 doctors in six referral categories: chemical addictions (98); behavioral (54); psychiatric (18); sexual boundary (15); over-prescribing (5); and referrals from our State Board of Medical Examiners (2). Total figures for 2006 are not yet compiled but the numbers have been fairly consistent for the past several years. Our services are provided free of charge to the doctors, are confidential and, I'm proud to say, have proven extremely effective. Of those with alcohol and drug abuse disorders, over 97 percent are able to return to the practice of medicine.

We are fighting a disturbing trend – the PHP is seeing troubled physicians much earlier in their careers. The average age of our referrals is 41, down from 55 just a few years ago.

Most referrals come from hospitals, medical groups, family and friends, and a few from the BME; occasionally, a troubled doctor will take the initiative to call us themselves. Once we determine a physician does have a problem, they sign a standard "contract" with the PHP – usually for five years – during which time they receive treatment or education, are required to submit to random drug testing when appropriate, must attend regional self-help / support group meetings along with 12-step meetings if warranted, must retain a primary care physician, and in the case of a dual diagnosis such as chemical

dependency and emotional illness, are required to be under the care of a psychiatrist.

While care is individualized for each client, the PHP offers help in seven major areas, and each of those areas has unique challenges: alcohol and drugs, disruptive behavior, mental/emotional problems, sexual boundaries, inappropriate prescribing, stress and burnout, and the medical marriage. ■

In Pt. II, Dr. Gray will examine each of these areas and discuss the help TMF offers to physicians with these problems. Reprinted with permission from the Physician Insurer Magazine, 2nd quarter, 2007.

To make a tax-deductible contribution to the PHP, contact TMF Administrator Mike Todd at (615) 467-6411 or write to the Tennessee Medical Foundation, 216 Centerview Dr., Suite 304, Brentwood, TN 37027. For more information, log on to www.e-tmf.org.

