The stresses of working on the frontlines of the medical profession are legion, and data shows that physicians are at greater risk of depression and depressive symptoms than the general population and double the average suicide rate.

Just a few years ago, Kevin Sowti, MD, MBA, was experiencing these troubling symptoms of burnout. Fortunately, Sowti, the medical director of Chester County Hospital’s Hospitalist Group and section chief of Hospital Medicine, recognized his symptoms, which enabled him to take action to treat them — including some leadership training so that he could help support the physicians he leads through similar struggles.

In 2019, Sowti’s role with the hospital’s wellness and entertainment committee took on a new identity and focus thanks to a collaboration with colleague Aneesha Dhargalkar, MD, who had already begun her own initiative among colleagues spurred on by her own deepening exhaustion.

A LESSON IN VULNERABILITY

For much of its existence, the committee had staged regular social gatherings in an effort to keep the hospital’s growing medical staff connected. Unknown to Sowti at the time, Dhargalkar, an emergency medicine physician at Chester County Hospital, had also begun formally assessing the mental and emotional health of her colleagues — an idea inspired by her participation in the wellness committee at her children’s school district. “I started to wonder whether some of the issues and initiatives they discussed were applicable to my work environment,” she said.

After sharing her findings about burnout, resiliency, and the value of wellness programs with her fellow doctors and advanced practice providers in the emergency department, she began asking them to complete a survey about how they are feeling every six months. The results enabled her to see and respond to a widespread interest in getting together outside of work.

What she noticed from the surveys was “an improvement in how people were feeling,” Dhargalkar said. “I mean, it wasn’t drastic, but there was mild improvement in how people were feeling about burnout. People seemed to feel less emotionally exhausted, and have a greater sense of personal accomplishment in what they’re doing. The bigger change, I think, was an openness to discuss burnout among the group. Now we’re having conversations one-on-one or among three or four of us about what we’re feeling and the issues that we’re facing. If nothing else, it’s fostered a better sense of camaraderie.”

Dhargalkar has since moved to part-time, but her work had already borne fruit, helping alleviate a lot of her own concerns, and leading her to collaborate with Sowti on the wellness and entertainment committee, now known as the Chester County Hospital Wellness Committee. Dhargalkar said its mission is “to eliminate burnout, reduce suffering, and promote a culture of wellness for our community by raising awareness, improving understanding, and creating and implementing programs and initiatives.”

To enact any sort of change, burnout needs to be discussed more openly and honestly, Dhargalkar said. To that end, she and Sowti began attending departmental meetings across the hospital, not only to hear their colleagues’ ideas but also to underscore the urgency and need of such a committee.

Michael J. Duncan, the hospital’s president and CEO, has been very supportive of the committee’s efforts, which is integral to affecting meaningful transformation, Sowti said.

As Awareness of Burnout Among Doctors Increases, A Group at CCH Bands Together to Create Positive Solutions

Continued on page 2

A New Partnership for a Healthy Community in West Philadelphia

On March 25, the Penn Medicine family got bigger, and its connections to the community of West Philadelphia grew closer, with the transition of the former Mercy Catholic Medical Center — Mercy Philadelphia campus.

“As any great idea, it took a village. It took a family. It required everyone to come together,” said Kevin B. Mahoney, CEO of the University of Pennsylvania Health System. “And the inspiration was: How do we take care of our neighbors, of our family members, of our community, in the very best setting? And that is always closest to home.”

The property is now known as PHMC Public Health Campus on Cedar and owned and operated by Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC), with Penn Medicine managing the hospital emergency department, inpatient services, and hospital-based behavioral health programming as a remote location for the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania (HUP), known as Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania — Cedar Avenue. Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) and the Independence Blue Cross Foundation join PHMC and Penn Medicine as coalition partners for the transformation.

Continued on page 4
Heroes of the Pandemic: LG HEALTH’S PHARMACY TEAM

In the months leading up to emergency authorization of the COVID-19 vaccines, Penn Medicine Lancaster General Health began preparing for the vaccine’s arrival and distribution to its employees and community. Matt Eberts, director of Pharmacy and IV Services, led his team of pharmacy managers and technicians and got to work. Their efforts included determining staffing needs, acquiring cold storage, and increasing supply of high-demand items such as needles and syringes.

“We treated the vaccine like a rare and precious resource by establishing tight and secure inventory controls,” said Kim Young, pharmacy manager. “We were even more challenged because we received two different manufacturers — vaccine products with slightly different storage and expiration guidelines.”

Each vial was initially said to contain five doses, but the pharmacy technicians were instrumental in extracting an additional vaccine dose out of as many Pfizer vials as possible. “There was a learning curve to the workflow, but through the determination of both nursing and pharmacy, we had very minimal vaccine waste,” Young said.

“We gained the sixth dose from well over 90 percent of the vials,” Eberts added. “Because of our team’s efforts, we were able to vaccinate an additional 700 people.”

When asked how the pharmacy technician job is different now compared to before the pandemic began, John DeJesus, lead pharmacy technician, said, “In a lot of ways it seems like we have been preparing for this since the early days of the pandemic, knowing that one day we would have the privilege of vaccinating our colleagues and community. Though the history books may not know our names, I will never forget all of the people and all that we achieved together this past year. I have never been so proud to be a part of the LG Health team.”

Moving forward, the LG Health pharmacy team will be a willing and ready resource for the community, including at the Community Vaccination Center that LG Health and other health systems in the region and county government opened last month which could vaccinate up to 6,000 people a day.
The upcoming Health Fairs also provide employees with an opportunity to learn more about their benefit options and interact with UPHS benefit vendors. This year’s fairs will be held virtually, but employees will still have the opportunity to ask questions and gather the information they need to make informed decisions. The UPHS Benefits Department will host a live vendor Q&A spotlight with some of the top UPHS vendors. In addition, the Benefits Department is creating a one-stop-shop website that includes all of the information employees would typically gather during an in-person health fair. Additional details about the health fairs will be communicated. Questions can also be directed to the Benefits Team at wellfocused@pennmedicine.upenn.edu.

A Tremendous Resource for Childhood Cancer Survivors

In 1999, when she was only 15 years old, Jillian Burns, BSN, now an oncology nurse at Pennsylvania Hospital, was diagnosed with osteosarcoma. At a time when most teens are thinking about high school activities and hanging out with friends, she was battling cancer with surgery and several months of chemotherapy infusions. More than 20 years later, she remains cancer-free and has dedicated her career to helping others battle the disease.

But, those same chemicals that saved her life impacted her future health. Indeed, during the first year, nerve damage from the chemo caused her to permanently lose 50 percent of her hearing. They later affected her fertility as well.

Burns is not alone. Three in four pediatric cancer survivors experience long-term medical effects, sometimes years or even decades after treatment ended, and for 25 percent, these may be life-threatening. And, like Burns’s hearing loss, many of these conditions seem to have no connection to the original cancer diagnosis. In addition, when childhood cancer survivors age out of pediatric care at 18 and transition to a new team, as well as managing their own medical care, they face new challenges. “Will the PCP or adult care team know about his long-term needs?” said Carolyn Vachani, MSN, managing editor of OncoLink, a cancer information website overseen by the Abramson Cancer Center.

“This group of survivors is at risk for slipping through the cracks during these major life and health transitions,” said Christine Hill-Kayser, MD, of Radiation Oncology and editor-in-chief of OncoLink, "and their medical and social needs can be neglected despite the best intentions and efforts.”

To help both this patient population and their clinical care providers better understand the potential risks of cancer treatment — and the necessary preventative steps — OncoLink has created Smart ALACC (Adults Living After Childhood Cancer).

The pediatric cancer survivorship program delivers customized information about a childhood cancer survivor’s health risks as an adult based on the cancer care they received, simply by entering what cancer treatments a patient received. For example, “If a childhood cancer survivor received a type of chemotherapy called an anthracycline, with or without radiation therapy to the chest, they will need monitoring for heart damage with an echocardiogram every few years,” Vachani said. In addition, the plan includes information on practical things like school, employment, insurance, relationships, and sexuality. According to Vachani, much of the information on ALACC has been available to the public through standard guidelines about late effects from childhood cancer treatments but it wasn’t always easily accessible or in a language that patients and families could understand.

Burns likes the site from both a medical and patient point of view. “When I printed out my cancer survivorship plan, it had bolded key takeaway points, which included symptoms to report, testing to get done yearly, and ways to manage long term side effects like fatigue. This makes it easy to remember,” she said. And I like the resources they provide at the end. It tells you that these people and organizations are here for you. You’re not alone.”

Read more about ALACC or create your own plan at https://smartalacc.oncolink.org/.

Preparing for Disaster

With their shears and sponges at the ready, fourth-year medical students Josia Broso and Ellie Pearlman immediately got to work as their classmate Amy Davis was wheeled into the decontamination tent. They carefully cut off her clothing and scrubbed her down to remove any radioactive contaminants, then sent her to the Emergency Department for further care.

All of this was part of mock mass casualty scenario set up at Penn Presbyterian Medical Center for the 16 students taking the wildly popular Wilderness and Disaster Medicine elective, developed and led by Peter D. Samannan, MD, director of Disaster Preparedness and an Emergency Medicine physician at PPMC.

The simulation challenged the students to think critically, act rapidly, and work collaboratively in a high-stress, quickly evolving situation. But even when the drill ended, they couldn’t relax just yet. Next up: A week of knot-tying, shelter-building, and splint-making to prepare them for wilderness emergencies.

HUP Oncologist Puts Her Knowledge to the Ultimate Test

Answer: This oncologist appeared on “Jeopardy!” and was able to rapidly provide responses ranging from “red velvet cake” to “Run-D.M.C.”

Who is … Pamela Sung, MD, PhD?

In February, Sung appeared on the classic quiz show “Jeopardy!” She grew up watching it with her dad and still remembers her first correct response: “What is Nickelodeon?” She later bonded with her husband over their love of the show on their first date, and they watch it together every day. They’ve both taken the contestant test several times, and Sung auditioned twice. “The third time’s the charm,” she said. Though she was concerned about flying cross-country during a pandemic, she couldn’t turn down the opportunity. Because one of her friends had previously appeared on the show, she had a good idea of what the experience would be like.

“They film a week’s worth of episodes in a day,” she said. “But everything’s a little different with COVID, so everyone stood far apart, and we had to get tested the day before. The audience consisted only of the crew and contestants. When I came home, it was fun to watch episodes featuring other players I met; my husband didn’t know how they ended, but I did!”

Though Sung was sad that she missed her chance to meet longtime host Alex Trebek, who passed away in November, she was thrilled that “Jeopardy!” champion Ken Jennings was serving as the interim host. She was less thrilled, however, when the producers didn’t like how Jennings ruled her answer of “L.A. Spark” incorrect, so he had to tell her she was wrong a second time. “I knew it was the L.A. Spark! I can’t believe I left the ‘s’ off,” she said.

Though Sung unfortunately didn’t win her game, it was “so exciting to fulfill a lifelong dream.”
Greg Evans worked systemwide to reduce waste, notably through development of a PMC, which opened in 2012, was designed to be environmentally friendly, and develop a strategy to increase the proportion of food produced through sustainable methods and suppliers.

“Sustainable foods. Princeton Health and its food and nutrition provider, Morrison Healthcare, will create a dashboard or scorecard to evaluate purchases of food and related items and develop a strategy to increase the proportion of food produced through sustainable methods and suppliers.

“Water usage. Water supply will become a concern over time due to climate change. Princeton Health will track water consumption systemwide and look for ways to conserve. Key areas to be studied include the central sterile department, the hospital’s cogeneration plant, kitchens, and outdoor uses such as landscaping and fountains.

Picture a row of electric vehicle charging stations at the Princeton Medical Center (PMC) campus in Plainsboro, N.J. Or buildings across Penn Medicine Princeton Health being retrofitted with energy efficient LED lighting and filtered water stations to help slash the use of plastic bottles. Operating rooms that recycle sterilization wrap — better known as “blue wrap” — to eliminate even more plastic waste.

Those are but a few of the initiatives that Princeton Health is exploring under the leadership of director of sustainability Greg Evans.

PMC, which opened in 2012, was designed to be environmentally friendly, notably through development of a cogeneration plant and solar panels to meet the hospital campus’ energy needs. Princeton Health also has worked systemwide to reduce waste, increase recycling, and use safer cleaning chemicals. Last summer, Evans was commissioned to analyze sustainability initiatives undertaken between 2012 and 2019 and make recommendations for a comprehensive strategy through the year 2030. In his new role, Evans will guide efforts to implement that strategy.

The initial focus will be decreasing energy usage. Other areas of interest include:

• Procurement. Princeton Health and Penn Medicine’s group purchasing organization will develop a supply chain dashboard to evaluate every product and vendor against sustainability attributes. This will help guide individual purchasing decisions and develop a larger procurement strategy that aligns with Princeton Health’s sustainability goals.

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“There is already energy and enthusiasm to create an even more sustainable organization at Princeton Health,” Evans said, “and I am excited to help develop and drive the strategy moving forward.”

Read more about the history and transition of the Mercy campus in this month’s issue of HUPdate, and watch the video [https://bit.ly/3blyGmi](https://bit.ly/3blyGmi) celebrating the new partnership and public health vision with devoted members of the staff who have now joined Penn Medicine.

When we come together we can do great things. Without unity, there is no community.

Penn Medicine at Home has helped thousands of patients stay safe — in the comforts of their own homes — while providing the often life-saving clinical care they needed. One patient recently took the time to write a letter, noting the incredible difference his team made in his life this year.

“While this has been an incredibly difficult year both publicly, and for me personally, I’ve also taken inventory of the things that I am grateful for — one of which is the Penn Home Infusion Team,” he wrote. And “while it was not just one person who makes the program what it is, some individuals stood out.”

— Marie Bonn, who works the phone to set up supplies and delivery, is wonderful.

— Ed White, the delivery driver who drops my medicine, is very professional and friendly.

— Bob Katzianer, the pharmacist, has been an incredibly helpful and courteous individual.

— Rebecca Martinez (his case manager) has been an invaluable resource, and she goes out of her way to coordinate my care in a selfless way.

— Elena Hrapcynski epitomizes what it is to be an exceptional nurse and a health care professional.


The PHMC Public Health Campus on Cedar Street is founded on the guiding principle to provide high-quality, community-informed, patient-centered health care and social services supporting the needs of the facility’s West and Southwest Philadelphia neighbors. The coalition’s goals for the new public health campus focus on health equity and aim to provide the community with access to primary and behavioral health care, emergency services, acute care services, substance use treatment, and other social support services.

“Social determinants of health play an absolutely critical role in terms of individual and community health, and we don’t need to look any further than the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Regina Cunningham, PhD, RN, CEO of HUP.

Beginning in late February, Penn Medicine partnered with Mercy Catholic Medical Center to run a series of volunteer-run, community-based COVID-19 vaccine clinics in West and Southwest Philadelphia, providing vaccination to more than 2,800 local residents — demonstrating the powerful nature of community partnerships when dedicated groups come together to support a community’s health.

“When we are really creating in West Philly is a healthy community. We want to make sure that we are addressing health inequities. We want to make sure we have patient-centered care right in the neighborhood,” Mahoney said.

A New Partnership for a Healthy Community in West Philadelphia

Continued from page 1

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