

Oncologists report high career satisfaction, yet many suffer symptoms of burnout

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Even though a majority of U.S. oncologists report satisfaction with their careers, many say they have experienced at least one symptom of burnout, a Mayo Clinic-led study has found. The study was released during the American Society of Clinical Oncology's annual meeting in Chicago.

"Oncology can be a tremendously rewarding area of medicine, but caring for patients with cancer is also demanding and stressful," says lead author Tait Shanafelt, M.D., a Mayo Clinic hematologist/oncologist. "Oncologists work long hours, supervise the administration of highly toxic therapy, and continually observe death and suffering, so it is important to study the issues of burnout and career satisfaction."

The study, based on a national survey of 3,000 oncologists who were members of ASCO between October 2012 and January 2013, found that 45 percent of oncologists had at least one symptom of burnout. Those symptoms included [emotional exhaustion](#) and depersonalization as measured using the Maslach Burnout Inventory, a tool that is used to evaluate the [effects of stress](#) on medical professionals and workers in other fields.

At the same time, 83 percent of oncologists said they were satisfied with their career. The survey sample included an equal number of men and women and an equal proportion of individuals from all [career stages](#). The survey used validated tools to assess feelings of burnout and well-being.

Among responders, 34 percent practiced in academic medical centers and 43 percent were in private practice. The rest worked in the military, with veterans or in industry. Oncologists worked an average of 51 hours per week and saw a mean of 51 outpatients per week.

Although the average number of hours worked by oncologists in academic medical centers and private practice were similar, there were significant differences in other practice characteristics such as sub-specialization within the field of oncology. Eighty-one percent of oncologists in academic medical centers reported focusing on caring for patients with a specific type of cancer, compared to 17 percent of oncologists in private practice.

Oncologists working at academic centers also devoted a much greater proportion of their time to research and educating future oncologists, while those in private practice spent most of their time on patient care. These differences translated into a difference in the number of patients seen per week by practice setting. Oncologists in [academic medical centers](#) reported caring for an average of 37 cancer patients per week, compared to the 74 patients seen each week by [oncologists](#) in private practice.

The authors recommend further research to identify personal and professional characteristics associated with burnout and [career satisfaction](#).

Provided by Mayo Clinic

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