

Why annual physical examinations for physicians can improve health care for all

EDITORIAL

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SUMMARY

This editorial explores the potential benefits of annual physical examinations for physicians, given the high prevalence of health issues among medical professionals. Key advantages include early detection of health problems, enhanced empathy towards patients, and maintenance of physical and cognitive fitness. The proposal also considers incorporating sensory acuity tests for specialties that require them. Challenges include potential increased burnout and confidentiality concerns. The path forward emphasizes creating supportive environments, voluntary wellness programs, and integrating health assessments with continuing medical education. The conclusion stresses the importance of prioritising physician health for overall healthcare quality.

Key Words: Physicians; health status; physical examination; occupational health; burnout

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of the Health Design conference (HDRx), hosted by *The Journal of Health Design*, is to identify measures that could be taken immediately to improve outcomes in health care without a major redesign of the sector. In the ever-evolving healthcare landscape, the wellbeing of medical professionals, particularly physicians, has become a topic of increasing concern. The authors of this editorial contributed to a debate on whether physicians should undergo annual physical examinations. It was acknowledged that this merits careful consideration, given the critical role doctors play in our healthcare systems and the unique stressors they face in their profession. This editorial is a summary of the deliberations.

The Current State of Physician Health

Recent studies have shed light on the alarming prevalence of health issues among physicians. As noted by Dr David Beaumont in the discussion, up to 70 per cent of doctors may be experiencing chronic physical or mental health conditions.¹ This statistic aligns with broader population trends, where approximately 60 per cent of Americans have a chronic illness.² The high-stress nature of medical practice, combined with long working hours and the emotional toll of patient care, contributes to these concerning health outcomes.³

The Benefits of Annual Checkups for Physicians

Mandatory annual checkups for physicians would offer four important benefits:

1. *Early detection and prevention:* Regular (annual) physical examinations could play a vital role in the early detection and management of health issues among physicians. Given the high prevalence of

chronic conditions in this population, proactive health screening becomes even more critical. Early intervention can prevent the progression of diseases and potentially save lives, allowing physicians to maintain their ability to provide quality care to patients. It could also help to prevent or mitigate physician burnout.

2. *Enhanced empathy and patient understanding:* As patient advocate Doug Lindsay pointed out, the experience of being a patient can significantly transform a physician's approach to care.⁴ By undergoing annual checkups, doctors place themselves in the patient's position, potentially enhancing their empathy and understanding of the healthcare process from the recipient's perspective. This role reversal can lead to improved patient-doctor communication and more patient-centred care practices.
3. *Maintaining physical and cognitive fitness:* Dr Moyez Jiwa drew an interesting parallel between the physical demands placed on surf lifesavers and the cognitive and physical requirements of medical practice. Just as lifesavers must maintain rigorous physical standards, physicians need to ensure their physical and mental acuity to perform their duties effectively. Regular checkups can help assess and maintain these crucial aspects of a doctor's fitness to practice.⁵
4. *Addressing sensory acuity:* Dr Tim McLerran's anecdote about a missed diagnosis due to a physician's unrecognized hearing impairment underscores a critical, yet often overlooked, aspect of physician health. Incorporating visual, auditory, and even tactile acuity tests could be appropriate for specialties that depend heavily on these senses. Specialty boards, which issue certifications, are best positioned to determine the acceptable standards for each field. For instance, in psychiatry—where physical exams may not require high sensory acuity—extensive testing might not be necessary, whereas dermatology could require primarily visual assessments. If a physician exhibits diminished acuity, assistive technologies (such as electronic stethoscopes or corrective eyewear) should enable them to meet these standards. Much like drivers are tested with the eyeglasses they use, physicians should be allowed to use their assistive devices during sensory acuity evaluations, with licenses to practice contingent on using the same technology in clinical settings.

Challenges and considerations

While the benefits of annual physical examinations for physicians are evident, implementing such a requirement is not without challenges. We highlight three:

1. *Systemic pressures and burnout:* As Dr Beaumont noted, the healthcare system is already under significant strain.⁷ Mandating additional requirements for physicians could potentially exacerbate existing pressures and contribute to burnout. Any implementation of annual checkups must be done in a way that supports, rather than burdens, healthcare professionals. Dr Carolyn O'Shea pointed out that a test of fitness to practice would need to consider the probability that living with a chronic condition does not immediately preclude a clinician from fitness to practice.

2. *Comprehensive health assessment:* Annual examinations for physicians should encompass both physical and psychological evaluations. Given the high rates of burnout and mental health issues in the medical profession, a holistic approach to physician wellbeing is essential.⁸ This may include assessments of stress levels, work-life balance, and mental health screenings.
3. *Confidentiality and career impact:* There may be concerns among physicians about how health information from annual checkups could impact their careers.⁹ Ensuring strict confidentiality and creating a supportive environment that encourages seeking help without fear of professional repercussions is crucial.

A path forward

Many physicians strive to optimise their patients' health at the expense of their own.¹⁰ This needs to change. Rather than implementing a punitive approach, the focus should be on creating supportive environments that encourage physicians to prioritise their health. This aligns with Dr Beaumont's call for innovative healthcare systems and new models of medical practice that empower both doctors and patients. Initiatives could include the following:

1. Voluntary health and wellness programs that incentivise participation in annual checkups.
2. Integration of health assessments, including visual and auditory acuity assessment, alongside continuing medical education as requirements for the maintenance of board certifications.
3. Peer support networks, as mentioned by healthcare research professor Alexandra McManus, to address mental health concerns and prevent physician isolation, particularly in rural areas.¹¹
4. Incorporation of lifestyle medicine principles into physician health programs, promoting preventive care and healthy habits among healthcare providers.¹²

CONCLUSION

The implementation of annual physical examinations for physicians might be a crucial step towards enhancing the quality of health care overall. By ensuring that doctors are physically and mentally fit, we safeguard not only their individual health but also their ability to provide optimal care to patients. Moreover, these checkups serve as a powerful reminder that physicians are humans, too, and deserve the same care and attention they provide to others. Doctors deserve an empathetic approach from themselves, their patients, and the system as a whole. As we move forward, it is imperative that we prioritise the health of those who dedicate their lives to healing others, recognising that their wellbeing is integral to the health of our entire healthcare system. By adopting a holistic approach to physician health—one that encompasses regular physical examinations, mental health support, and systemic changes to reduce burnout—we can create a healthcare culture that truly values prevention, empathy, and the wellbeing of all its members. After all, healthy doctors are better equipped to lead the charge in creating healthier communities.

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