

More than one-third of physicians who have committed suicide experienced an alcohol or drug problem at some point in their lives.

## Physician depression and suicide

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UNTREATED DEPRESSION among physicians is resulting in an epidemic of suicide attempts both across the country and in the state of Washington. There is one suicide every 20 minutes in our country. A systematic review of 14 studies on suicide of physicians published from 1963 to 1991 demonstrated that for men

physicians, the suicide risk ranged from 1.1 to 3.4 times that of the general population. For women physicians, the suicide risk ranged from 2.5 to 5.7 times that of the general population.

Suicide accounts for 3% of all men physician deaths and 6.5% of all

women physician deaths annually. For young physicians, suicide is the most common cause of death, at 26%.

Among all physicians, suicide is responsible for 35% of premature deaths. The two highest risk periods for suicide occur while establishing a new practice after residency and when nearing retirement.

Risk factors include female gender, age greater than 45, divorce, separation, unmarried status, depression, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, work obsession, chronic pain, debilitating illness, change in professional status, loss of autonomy, loss of emotional security, financial losses, increased demands, access to lethal medications and firearms, and a previous suicide attempt.

For five to ten years after a suicide attempt, use of alcohol is the strongest predictor of completed suicide. In fact, 40 to 60% of completed suicides across the United States involve alcohol or drugs.

While some studies have indicated that suicide rates are higher for physicians practicing psychiatry, ophthalmology, otorhinolaryngology and anesthesia, the studies have been poorly done and the conclusions are possibly untrue.

However, it is true that physicians have a tendency to self-diagnose and self-treat their depression and substance abuse because they are afraid to seek care. Barriers to seeking care include shame; stigma; issues of confidenti-

ality; and discrimination in medical licensing, hospital privileges and professional advancement.

Suicide in physicians may be prevented if physicians take the following steps:

1. Establish a source of regular health care and seek treatment for mood disorders, substance abuse and suicidality.
2. Learn to recognize depression and suicidality in themselves.
3. Become familiar with state and federal regulations regarding confidentiality, health records and disabilities.
4. Visit the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (see <http://www.afsp.org>).
5. Become familiar with resources available through state physician health programs, including the Washington Physicians Health Program (WPHP). The WPHP is a nonprofit corporation founded by the Washington State Medical Association to reach out to troubled colleagues. WPHP helps identify, refer for evaluation or treatment, and monitor the recovery of medical professionals experiencing depression, substance abuse, physical disorders or mental disorders.

WPHP is a confidential resource to the maximum extent provided by law for any physician, physician assistant, or their spouses, employers or colleagues who have concerns that a practitioner might be at risk for potential impairment. To reach Dr. Oreskovich and the WPHP, call 1 (800) 552-7236, visit [www.wphp.org](http://www.wphp.org) or email [moreskovich@wphp.org](mailto:moreskovich@wphp.org). ♣

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## Federal legislation to overhaul the Indian Health Service passes the Senate

THE SENATE IN FEBRUARY voted 83-10 to bolster the Indian Health Service in screening for cancer and diabetes, disease prevention and mental health benefits. It would also add physicians and nurses, and modernize and build health clinics.

The Senate-approved legislation would add \$35 billion over 10 years to improve tribal health care for 1.8 million American Indians and Alaska Natives on reservations across the nation. The House is expected to take up the measure later this year.

Seattle is home to the largest urban Indian health clinic in the country. ♣