

Why will U.S. doctors leave medicine?

I was having dinner with one of our radiologists and his wife recently, along with another couple who were friends from London, England. Our radiologist was raised in Ireland and had practiced medicine there and in England before coming to the U.S. We were having a long discussion about the relative merits of the European style of two-tiered medicine versus the U.S. style of medicine. It was a very interesting discussion which identified why we don't want to devolve into the European style of practice because of the rampant rationing of care. They gave me an example of an elderly woman who was having sudden bouts of hematuria (blood in the urine). She went to her family doctor who told her that she needs to see a urologist (urinary tract specialist). She wasn't able to get an appointment for 4 months.

When she finally got in to see the urologist and she described her symptoms to him, he told her that in order to properly diagnose her, she would need to have a cystoscopy done. She asked when she could get one and he told her 3-4 months. This means she would have waited 8 months for what could have been a life-threatening disease process! This woman happened to have a trip planned to see friends in the U.S shortly after her urology appointment, so she came abroad and mentioned the experience to her friends who recommended that she go to see their local U.S. urologist. She asked how long it would take and they told her perhaps a week, so she scheduled a visit and went.

When she got to the urologist, he also told her that she needed a cystoscopy. She again asked how long it would take to schedule the exam since she's only in the U.S. for a few more weeks. He said "Would 10 minutes from now be ok?" They set up the exam and did her cystoscopy immediately within the urology office. Luckily, her bleeding was caused by some leaking veins in the base of her kidney and not from a life-threatening renal tumor.

The point of this story is simply that there are many negative pressures on physicians in the U.S. today that could de-motivate them, frustrate them, and potentially drive them to change professions or to retire early. In light of the already looming physician shortage, this is a significantly ominous scenario. Will it be the rapidly decreasing physician compensation that drives them out of medicine? Perhaps a few, but generally, I don't think so. Will it be the rapidly increasing bureaucratic hassles, or the tremendous work-load facing them by adding all of the uninsured to the "low-pay" category of patients? No, I don't believe so. I think the thing most likely to drive physicians out of their practice is to watch the deterioration of the system of medicine that has been built over the last several decades in the U.S., and to have to watch patients suffer from the rampant rationing of care. For many, I'm afraid,...this will simply be too much to stomach.