

Young Docs May Redefine Professional Values

BY CALVIN PIERCE

PHILADELPHIA — A new generation of young physicians will redefine what it means to be a medical professional—and how to balance a successful career with a rewarding personal life.

That's a prospect that Dr. Lawrence G. Smith views with optimism. As young doctors with different values enter practice, older physicians have a chance to "build bridges" and help renew the profession, he said at the annual meeting of the American College of Physicians.

As physicians, baby boomers—a generation of optimists and workaholics—"have done nothing in medicine to improve social justice." Boomer doctors generally "value physician autonomy over quality of care," a stance that is "perniciously negative."

The legacy of the baby boomers is "the most mediocre, high-cost health care system the world's ever seen," said Dr. Smith, dean of the medical school at Hofstra University, Hempstead, N.Y., and chief medical officer for the North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System, Great Neck, N.Y.

Yet boomer doctors keep asking: "Why is the young generation so unprofessional?" Dr. Smith cited data from Merritt Hawkins & Associates, a national physician search and consulting firm. In a 2007 survey of doctors aged 50-65 years in various specialties, 68% of the 1,175 respondents said that newly trained physicians are less dedicated and hard working than the senior doctors were when they started out.

New doctors are starting medical school later in life, are predominantly women, are ethnically diverse, are wired into technology, and—above all—are determined to "work to live," in contrast to the boomer ethos of "living to work" that defines people through their jobs. To accommodate young physicians who value predictable workweeks and control of their lifestyle, medical practices will

need to offer flexible hours, child care, a culture of quality, and a reward system that emphasizes excellence over sheer endurance, he said.

Generation X physicians (born in 1965-1980) have begun transforming medical practice by rejecting the boomers' pride in long work hours, focusing instead on achieving balance. "They will work hard when they work," but they want freedom and time, Dr. Smith said.

Generation Y (born since 1981 and also known as the Millennial Generation) is just starting medical school. This was "a safe, protected, sheltered group of kids" who grew up going to "play dates" and other planned activities. They tend to be conservative, rules oriented, and fond of security, and they like working in teams. This optimistic, achievement-driven generation "is looking for work that has meaning," he said.

Generation X and Generation Y physicians need to be "unafraid of falling totally in love with being a doctor," Dr. Smith said. Their reluctance to be totally committed to a medical career is a reaction against the boomer tendency to equate professional commitment with a willingness to sacrifice their personal lives.

For younger physicians, the value is in altruism, not in the number of hours worked. ■



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