

WPHP Report Making Meaning from Outrage



WASHINGTON
**Medical
Commission**
Licensing. Accountability. Leadership.

Chris Bundy, MD, MPH

Executive Medical Director, Washington Physicians Health Program

A few weeks ago, I was leading a wellness workshop for physicians. In one of the exercises, I asked participants to reflect on a time in their career when the alignment between their actions and their values had been most challenged. Stories from COVID-19 frontliners, caring for unvaccinated patients at the height of the Delta surge, overshadowed any other discussion. These physicians painfully described, with candor and vulnerability, the causes and consequences of actions which left them demoralized and often disappointed in themselves.

Fear, anger, frustration, and moral distress experienced by healthcare workers throughout the pandemic have been intensified during Delta. The preventability of suffering and death, the absurdity of it all, the overwhelm and exhaustion, the disregard and hostility toward science and public health, all contribute to our collective outrage.

This outrage, a normal psychological response to unacceptable circumstances, is a place we may be forced to visit but we should not live there. As Pulitzer Prize winning author, Sherry Fink, MD, PhD, reminded us in her keynote at the WSMA Annual meeting this year, doctors have survived genocides by making meaning from their outrage. Staying in outrage cannot move us forward, we must redirect that energy to a higher purpose.

Over the last several months we have begun to see outrage galvanizing workforce reform efforts. This past summer, the Health Resources and Services Administration announced over \$100 million in grants to support health care workforce mental health, resilience, and wellness. At the same time, the [Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act](#) was passed in the U.S Senate and is now making its way through the House. It is expected to provide another \$140 million in grants to support education and programs aimed at addressing the drivers of burnout and dissatisfaction in the profession.

In [recent testimony](#) on the Lorna Breen Act before the U.S. House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Representative Kim Schrier, a Washington physician, recognized and applauded the Washington Medical Commission and Washington Physicians Health Program (WPHP) as models for institutionalized wellness. She noted that Washington is a place that encourages physicians to get help and does not punish them for having done so.

In November, the WMC adopted yet another round of improvements to the licensing application that replace health related questions with an advisory. Accordingly,

applicants are advised of their responsibility to contact WPHP if they have an impairing or potentially impairing health condition. And, while the application still asks about current substance use, applicants can answer “no” to the question if they are known to WPHP. These improvements are not only regulatory best practices nationally, but they represent a sincere effort to encourage physicians and PAs to seek help when needed.

One of the silver linings of the pandemic is that physicians have learned that it is okay to open discuss not being okay. Vulnerability, the power of shared experience, and our collective outrage have coalesced into a local and national dialogue that is finally moving the needle on efforts to address fundamental flaws in the healthcare ecosystem that are critical threats to the sustainability of our workforce. This silver lining is critical, considering that some of our most challenging days may still be ahead.

In his Meditations, Marcus Aurelius, wrote, “Impediment to action advances action. The obstacle on the path becomes the way.” The COVID-19 pandemic has provided countless examples of resilience and adaptation, that were responses to obstacles on the path. As we turn the calendar on a new year, we can confront challenges knowing that they are necessary for our advancement. We should not be discouraged by what we have faced or by what we must still overcome. An abiding faith in our ability to succeed in the face of adversity, to make meaning from our outrage and become stronger for it, can help ease the woes that sometimes accompany us on the happy road of destiny.

WMC Meetings and Events [Full Schedule](#)

WMC Policy Meeting	January 13, 2022 4:00pm
WMC Business Meeting	January 14, 2022 8:00am
WMC Policy Meeting	March 3, 2022 4:00 pm
WMC Business Meeting	March 4, 2022 8:00am