



Here to Help: An Interview with Jack R. Woodside, Jr., M.D. Physicians Health Program, Assistant Medical Director

For 24 years, the Tennessee Medical Foundation's Physicians Health Program (PHP) has been pulling Tennessee physicians out of the depths of addiction, mental illness and paralyzing burnout. A key component of the PHP, Jack R. Woodside, Jr., M.D., has served as Assistant Medical Director of the Physicians Health Program since 1998. Dr. Woodside is an Associate Professor of family medicine at the James H. Quillen College of Medicine at East Tennessee State University.

Dr. Woodside, why do you make time to serve as Assistant Medical Director for the PHP among all your other responsibilities?

My personal experience with addiction and subsequent recovery gives me a particular ability to reach out to other physicians in distress. I've been there; I know the feelings of isolation and hopelessness that can overwhelm physicians. Helping others serves as part of my personal recovery process. How many jobs are there where one can watch spirit, vitality and joy gradually replace pain, fear and despair?

Why is it so difficult for some physicians to reach out for help?

Mental health and addiction are often stigmatized as character defects or personal failings, which leads those suffering from such problems to feelings of shame. When shame enters the picture, it's very hard to ask for help. Even though physicians are trained to approach these same problems in our patients as biological diseases that respond to appropriate treatment, we somehow don't make this connection in our own lives. And even though it is rare for a physician in Tennessee to suffer career damage as a result of seeking help from the PHP, fear of such damage often prevents physicians from asking for help. Ironically, losing jobs, hospital and managed care privileges and medical licenses are common results of **not** treating these diseases.

What is the hardest part of the job?

Our success rate with physicians in recovery is very good, but physicians do relapse. Relapses, and the resulting pain and disappointment they create for the physician and their families are the most difficult part of this job for me. Tending to our physical,

mental and spiritual well-being are key to preventing relapse as well as building resilience. I find it a challenge to maintain a healthy balance between time at work, with family and friends and recreation, something I didn't always consider as important as I do today. Physicians often figure they will find time to care for themselves when life is easier or "next year." This psychology of postponement, as described by Roy Menninger, M.D., often prevents physicians from living life fully.

In your capacity at ETSU, what do you tell students and residents to help them understand the career and personal stressors that can lead to health problems and behavioral illnesses?

New residents receive information about the Physicians Health Program during orientation and in lecture/discussions during residency. We are currently reviewing ETSU's medical school curriculum for an appropriate place to introduce the subject of physician impairment. We know that prevention and education, as early as possible in physicians' careers' is preferable to intervention later in the course of disease.

Physicians can easily access the TMF Physicians Health Program by calling (615) 467-6411 or writing the TMF, 216 Centerview Drive, Suite 304, Nashville, TN, 37027. All communications to the program are strictly confidential.

To make a tax deductible contribution to the Physicians Health Program, contact TMF Administrator Michael Todd at (615) 467-6411 or write to the Tennessee Medical Foundation, 216 Centerview Drive, Suite 304, Brentwood, TN 37027.