Since its inception, the Medical Board’s Wellness Committee, now known as the Education & Wellness Committee, has focused on the goal of promoting the importance of well-being to physicians through a series of articles in this newsletter. We have heard and shared stories from Kaiser Permanente Director of Fitness-Andy Gallardo, from former Board Member and current subcommittee member Laurie Gregg, M.D., we’ve heard from experts on mentoring and its many benefits, and we will continue to share these inspiring stories with you. Read on:

Finding Balance
by Robert Bonakdar, M.D., F.A.A.F.P.
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On September 20, 2011 we lost Lee Lipsenthal, M.D., a California physician and passionate advocate for physician wellness. This article and the series are dedicated to his work and vision.

There is not a physician that more exemplified balance than Lee Lipsenthal. I first had the pleasure of meeting Lee at a Scripps Clinic conference about a decade ago. Lee was giving a lecture on stress management and he surely knew the topic based on his work with heart patients. Prior to coming to California he had been the Director of Cardiovascular Services for the Benjamin Franklin Clinic in Philadelphia. Once in California, he became the Medical Director of the Preventive Medicine Research Institute. The institute coordinated the Ornish Program for Reversing Heart Disease for which our clinic was one of the early clinical sites. Through his passion for a balanced approach to cardiac care, he tirelessly worked with the most Type A of patients, knowing that a comprehensive approach, which included stress management, had the best chance of preventing heart attacks and reducing costs.

Unfortunately, in his work with the many clinicians who were in the front lines of care, he realized that they were in as much need for balance as the patients in the program. He also realized that in helping these clinicians find balance, the care they provide would improve as well as bring them increased life and work satisfaction. He made the difficult choice to work upstream, and over time, Lee dedicated his career to the cause of clinician balance.

As he began this particular lecture, instead of a typical gloomy review of the state of physician stress and burnout, he helped the audience remember why they got into medicine and the little pleasures (for him it included music and baseball) that made life a joy. He was able to take a topic that sounded bleak and transition it into a picture of hope. Since that point, I have been an admirer and friend of Lee’s. In a topic area with no blockbuster drugs or lucrative advisory boards, I saw him spend his time selflessly lecturing to med students, insurers, medical groups and organizations (including the AAFP, AMA and Kaiser among many). Over time they became convinced of the crisis of physician burnout and the merits of clinician stress management and resiliency.

In most cases, like with me, he found converts in the audiences he spoke to. As he often did, he would provide encouragement (as well as slides if needed) to support those who would help him take the message to those most in need. With increased demand, he was able to collect his advice in a book called Finding Balance in a Medical Life which I would recommend to all readers as a key guide for finding balance.

He then went on to develop courses, included a Kaiser CME program on the topic as one of the nation’s first online courses for clinician balance. As he said in the book, “I … think of balance as the stability to ride the winds of change. To be successful and happy, one must be ready to catch the wind when it arises.”

In July of 2009 at the age of 52, he was caught in a storm of change as he was diagnosed with metastatic esophageal cancer. After the diagnosis, instead of retreating, in typical Lee fashion, he decided there was no better time to find balance. So he put his soul into his last book and his greatest collection of wisdom, Enjoy Every Sandwich; Living Each Day as if it Were Your Last. He asked himself, and his readers, important questions including who and what are most important? If you had just a few months to live what would you spend your time doing? He lived his answers by going on an international trip with his family and continued to speak to audiences. One of the last times I saw him was at the AAFP National Assembly in the fall of 2010. There during his keynote address, he remarked: “Balance is knowing that today is a good day to die; that you have lived fully, lovingly, and without remorse.”

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During the subsequent year, Lee continued to press on, inspiring everyone he knew that balance and gratitude can come at any time including during the last chapters of one’s life. I was continually inspired by his composure and grace and have been able to tell his wife Kathy, also a physician, how lucky the world was to have Lee.

Lee provided many gifts to medicine and humanity including his instrumental work with the Ornish program, which in August of 2010 gained Medicare approval. More importantly, he proved with his actions and intentions that balance and its key components, gratitude and acceptance, are possible at any moment, even the most difficult. So in the spirit of Lee’s work, the MBC Newsletter is launching Finding Balance, an ongoing series on this topic. We will be exploring the causes and innovative solutions clinicians and clinics are using to find solutions for stress and burnout.

We encourage you to write us at Webmaster@mbc.ca.gov to share your struggles and stories. Let us know what has worked for you so we can continue the support of our colleagues at every stage of training and practice – as Lee would have endorsed. I also invite you to check out some of Lee’s other work as referenced below and consider attending the Osler Symposium “Doctoring in the 21st Century — Embracing the Challenge” taking place October, 2012 in San Diego. This conference is dedicated to Lee Lipsenthal and will feature the inaugural Lee Lipsenthal Lecture by Dean Ornish MD. In the meanwhile I hope that as Lee would have encouraged, you do your best to enjoy every sandwich.

⁴ Further resources:
- AAFP keynote presentation: www.aafp.org search under “Lipsenthal”
⁵ Physician balance conference: The Osler symposium: www.oslersymposia.org

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Fascinating Fun Facts Answers

1. There are 44,161 California medical school graduates (24% of U.S. graduates) of which 7,612 (17% of California medical school graduates) graduated from the UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN FRANCISCO SCHOOL OF MEDICINE.

2. Excluding California, the United States medical school that has produced the highest number of California licensed physicians is the UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, COLLEGE OF MEDICINE. This school has graduated 4,120 of the Board’s licensed physicians.

3. India (8,242 graduates were issued California licenses; 18% of all IMGs licensed in California) has produced the highest number of international medical school graduates that were issued a California physician’s license. The medical school in India that has produced the highest number of licensed physicians is PUNJAB UNIVERSITY, GOVERNMENT MEDICAL COLLEGE. This school has graduated 499 of the Medical Board of California’s licensed physicians.