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HEALTH AND BEHAVIOR

Managed care has doctors struggling to manage stress

By Doug Levy
USA TODAY

Maintaining the calm demeanor of Marcus Welby, M.D., is proving more difficult for doctors these days, so much so that some call in professional counselors.

"This is a time of a lot of stress in medical offices," says Gary Luckman, a Plantation, Fla., physician. "Managed care has introduced a whole new set of things that increase the stress."

The strains are almost everywhere. A survey for *Modern Healthcare* magazine found 81% of hospitals report morale problems among their staffs, up from 69% in 1993. Mergers, downsizing and other effects of managed care are to blame.

In Luckman's internal medicine practice, his staff and colleagues have an entire layer of work that didn't exist a decade ago: When a patient needs complicated treatments or specialty referrals, paperwork or phone calls have to go to an HMO or insurance company. "It used to be just the doctor and the patient."

Now, Luckman's office has its own "family therapist," psychologist Jack Singer, whose practice in Las Vegas and Fort

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Lauderdale now focuses on stress in the medical workplace.

Singer says he has seen a lot more anger, tension and hopelessness among his physician patients in recent years. He conducted a survey of 500 doctors in 11 states and found almost all of them complain of added stress in their practices. Common stresses include dealing with insurance companies and managed care organizations, coping with regulations and fearing malpractice litigation.

"When physicians are angry or tense, the probability of them committing malpractice is much greater," Singer says. "Physicians have been getting much more tense and much angrier in the past few years." His methods to help doctors cope include:

► **Teaching stress reduction techniques such as walking or other exercise.**

"They need to be out of the office a certain number of hours a week."

► **Helping identify the causes of anger.** Doctors frequently find "doom and gloom" in the future, Singer says. "I teach them to treat change as opportunity."

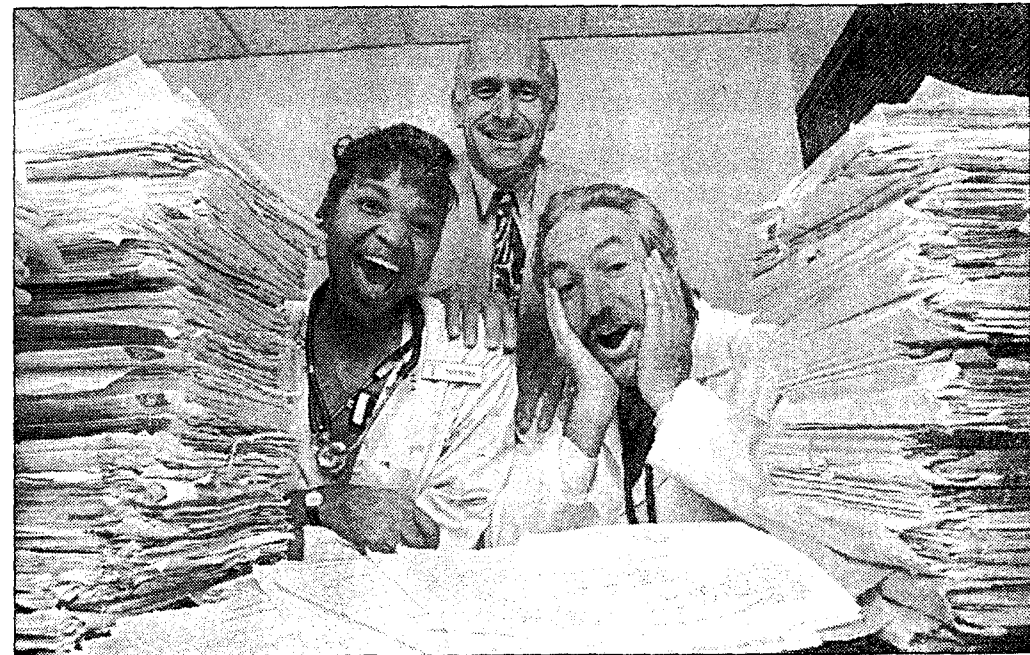
► **Improving family relationships.** "Many (doctors) wind up in extramarital affairs because of the stress, and they kiss off their families, yet that's the foundation of their support system."

► **Teaching exercise and nutrition.** "Doctors are the last ones to practice what they preach."

In Luckman's office, the biggest problem was getting the staff to work well under pressure. Singer met with the staff first, then the staff and doctors together.

"They went over the problems they were having with the doctors and how to deal with certain patient demands, how the phones are difficult," Luckman says. The third session was a chance to face the doctors with problems they could solve.

Calling in outside help is Luckman's way of keeping his dedicated office workers, many of whom have worked for Luckman and his colleagues 10 years or more. "We look upon them as our partners," he says.



By Andrew Itkoff
Stacks of stress: Jack Singer, standing, teaches health care professionals such as medical assistant Sherilyn O'Neal and Dr. Gary Luckman how to deal with stress caused by mountains of paperwork.