



Fields of Opportunities

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State program reaches more than 300 impaired physicians

DES MOINES, IA -- More than 300 Iowa-licensed physicians have been involved in a state program to support doctors who struggle with physical or mental impairments, or drug and alcohol problems.

The Iowa Physician Health Program, which operates under the Iowa Board of Medicine, reports it had 81 physicians under contract on June 30, the end of fiscal year 2009. In the past year, 27 physicians self-reported to the program and 35 were discharged. This compares with 86 under contract, 39 self-reports and 45 discharges in FY 2008.

About 12 percent of the current participants have physical impairments, 32 percent have substance abuse issues, 31 percent have mental health issues, and 25 percent have dual diagnosis.

There have been 312 self-reports since 1996, when the state program was established. Both an advocate for licensees' health and a means to protect the health and safety of the public, the program monitors physicians with diagnosed impairments to ensure they are able to practice with reasonable skill and safety.

Participation is voluntary and confidential. By self-reporting, a physician can avoid possible discipline by the Board that could result from a complaint associated with the impairment. Participants may be required to undergo a professional evaluation. They must adhere to a strict schedule of monitoring -- counseling, treatment, drug screening and so forth -- file progress reports, and meet regularly with the IPHP Committee.

"The IPHP is a great opportunity for physicians who are having issues to ask for help proactively," said Kent Croskey, D.O., chairman of the committee. "Doctors should have the right to ask for help from their own licensing agency when they need support."

Dr. Croskey, a Des Moines anesthesiologist, said the program is a way for most physicians to stay in practice, with monitoring, and to ensure that the people of Iowa are receiving safe, quality health care.

“This is far more attractive than the alternative of being disciplined by the Board for impairment issues,” he said.

Deb Anglin, IPHP coordinator, said the contracts for physicians vary, depending upon the impairment. Physical disability contracts are usually indefinite, but the program has discharged physicians whose conditions have improved or stabilized. Mental health and substance dependency/abuse contracts can be for up to five years, depending upon the recommendation that comes when a physician's impairment is diagnosed and evaluated. Dependency cases are always monitored for a minimum of five years, she noted.

The findings of a national study by the University of Florida released earlier this year confirmed that physician health programs are effective alternatives to simply punishing drug-addicted doctors. More than three-quarters of doctors enrolled in state programs stayed drug-free over a five-year monitoring period, according to a study published in the March issue of the Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment.

More information about the Iowa program is available at www.iphp.iowa.gov or from Deb Anglin at (515) 281-6491 or deb.anglin@iowa.gov