Tufts Medical Center
2013 Recognizing Physician Impairment
Training Objectives

• To educate staff that physicians are as vulnerable to health problems, including mental health and substance abuse disorders, as all other staff are.

• To stress the importance of early recognition and preventive measures in successfully dealing with physician impairment.

• To help staff recognize important signs and symptoms of physician impairment and to discuss staff responsibilities to our patients and other staff with respect to physician impairment.

• To familiarize staff with available resources and how to access them for yourself or a colleague who may be impaired.
The following statement was adopted as AMA Policy at the 1995 Annual AMA meeting.

"The AMA defines physician impairment as any physical, mental, or behavioral disorder that interferes with ability to engage safely in professional activities."

In general, physicians become impaired because of three major problems:

- 1. Substance abuse -- Alcohol abuse is the most common problem. Abuse of narcotics, sedatives and other depressants as well as stimulants, including cocaine, may also occur. According to current estimates, 5-8 percent of physicians abuse alcohol and 2 percent abuse narcotics.

- 2. Psychological problems -- Excessive stress, depression, anxiety and divorce are the most common issues.

- 3. Physical illness -- Physical ailments, either temporary or long-term, can lead to incapacity.

Of these three groups of illnesses, substance abuse is the problem for which physicians are least likely to seek help.
The impaired physician acts in an unusual manner and exhibits behaviors that can serve as warnings, if they are recognized and understood.

– 1. ‘They are just not the same person we used to know... ’
   - Loss of enthusiasm, Negative attitudes
   - Cynical, fault-finding remarks; Sarcastic, complaining, antagonistic behavior
   - Involvement in non-productive staff or administrative battles
   - Complaint’s of being overworked, misunderstood
   - Isolation, mistrust, abandonment of old friends

– 2. "We can’t trust his work anymore... "
   - Changes in work habits (disruption of consistent patterns); Erratic productivity
   - Changes in handwriting; Wrong dates, word reversals, dosage errors
   - Change in prescribing habits; Change in number of consults
   - Procedural errors; Errors of omission with alibis, cover-ups
   - Missed appointments, meetings, dropping of committees; Complaints from staff, patients, families

– 3. She seems different somehow... “
   - Looks tired; admits to insomnia; Eyes don’t look right
   - Personal hygiene changes; looks seedy; May smell of stale alcohol, mouthwash or strong cologne
   - Tremulous or sweaty; agitated or restless; depressed, anxious, mistrustful of others
   - Changes in speech (slurring, careful cadence, stammering or blocking, “tranquilizer lilt”)
   - Changes in appetite or exercise pattern; recent weight change
Helping Others

- There are several steps that can be taken that are confidential and that offer the opportunity for you or your colleague to get help. If you feel someone may be impaired:

  - First -- Approach your colleague. Mention what you have noticed (the specific behaviors that have caused your concern), and ask for an explanation. Inquire directly if there is a problem.

  - Second -- If your colleague denies there is a problem but you still suspect there is one, wait a while for him or her to resume the conversation. If the topic isn't brought up again, and you still fear a problem exists, contact a reliable source for advice. This can be done anonymously.

  - Third -- Based on the above information, on advice from reliable sources, and your own observations, decide if you still think there's a problem.

  - Fourth -- If you are convinced you or your fellow physician does have a problem, you must take action. This kind of problem does not go away on its own -- instead, it is likely to worsen -- but if caught early, the potential for a successful outcome is far greater.
If you are convinced that a colleague has a problem but has not acknowledged it, you must refer your concerns to someone in a position to intervene. Likewise, if you feel you are impaired in some way, you should promptly seek help and advice. You may consider contacting any of the following:

- **Supervising Physicians, Program Directors, Chief Residents**: These include the Program Director for residents and the Division Chief or Department Chairman for other staff physicians. These are good resources to contact for help in modifying the clinical responsibilities of the involved physician and for investigation & treatment. They are committed both personally and professionally to the best interests of the physician. In addition, they may be aware of some history that may make your observations carry additional importance. There is a good chance that these individuals have dealt with similar situations in the past and this experience can be helpful.

- **Massachusetts Medical Society**:  
  **How to Make a Referral to PHS (Physician Health Service)** - If you’re concerned about yourself or a colleague, call PHS at 781-434-7404, or toll free at 800-322-2303, ext. 7404. Ask to speak with the director, Dr. Luis T. Sanchez. If the director is not available, ask to speak to the director of program operations. There are also five associate directors located throughout the state who are physicians and who are available for initial consultations as needed.  
  [http://www.massmed.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=How_to_Make_a_Referral](http://www.massmed.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=How_to_Make_a_Referral)

- **Tufts Medical Center Physician Health Services Committee**:  
  - Edward Silberman, MD  
    Chair, Physician Health Services Committee  
    617-636-5773 or esilberman@tuftsmedicalcenter.org
  
  - Patricia Hayward, Esq.  
    Associate General Counsel  
    617-636-4682 or Phayward@tuftsmedicalcenter.org

- **Tufts Medical Center Employee Health**:  
  - Jack Doyle, MD  
    Director, Employee Health Services  
    617-636-4785 or JRDoyle@tuftsmedicalcenter.org
Physicians are least likely to seek help for which problem?

a) Physical illness
b) Psychological problems
c) Substance abuse (correct answer)

People with substance abuse problems generally get better on their own if you just leave them alone.

a) True
b) False (correct answer)

If you want help for yourself or for someone else, you can get help by contacting:

a) Employee Health
b) Physician Health Services Committee
c) MA Medical Society
D) All of the above (correct answer)