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## Frustrated physicians find careers outside of medicine

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After 17 years of 16-hour days and late-night visits to the ER, Dr. Lorne Weeks was in danger of losing his family.

"I was leaving early in the morning when it was dark. I saw some very anxious signs in my marriage and family life," the orthopedic surgeon said. "I was working harder and harder and longer and longer hours and bringing home less to show for it."

So he did what a growing number of doctors are doing: He left medicine for a job with better hours, more autonomy and good pay. Doctors say sagging reimbursements, rising medical malpractice premiums, long hours and more bureaucracy are driving them from medicine.

Weeks' new career is helping other doctors make a similar change. First a client of career strategy firm CareerLab in Englewood, he is now medical director of Physician Career Network, a division of CareerLab.

Having seen its customer base grow 20 percent to 25 percent for the last four years, PCN recently added a former hospital and physician practice administrator and support from financial advisers at Merrill Lynch and two national law firms. CareerLab has 10 employees, and PCN has worked with more than 250 clients since 1999.

"I left clinical practice for an environment where I could heal without third-party interference. Now, I help other physicians rediscover joy in their professional lives," Weeks said. "In some cases, that means improving their present practice; in others, it means finding a new career."

However, only 20 percent of Weeks' customers retool their practices; 80 percent leave medicine.

"There's a sense of being asked to play a game that's dramatically different than what we contracted for in medical school," Weeks said. "Physicians are now providers, and patients are now clients. ... There's an obvious sense of betrayal."

In a survey released last month by the Massachusetts Medical Society, 28 percent of doctors said they were contemplating a career change due to the practice environment. Those numbers grew to 56 percent for neurosurgeons, 40 percent for OB/GYNs and 36 percent for ER doctors.

But there's even dissatisfaction among doctors just starting their careers.

One-quarter of residents said they would choose another field if they had to begin their education again, according to a recent survey by Merritt, Hawkins & Associates. Resi-



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**Dr. Lorne Weeks with his wife Lynne and three of their five children: Rachel, 5; Tyler, 18; and Jennifer, 7.**

dents said they were concerned about malpractice and dealing with managed care and other payers.

The number of applicants to U.S. medical schools has dropped every year since 1996.

"The angst is very pervasive," Weeks said. "'A' students are eschewing a career in health care. ... They see greater opportunities to ramp up their income potential."

Dr. Robert Cox, 53, of Denver, contacted Physician Career Network in 2001 after having quintuple bypass surgery. He had practiced internal medicine, focusing on infectious

## **DOCTORS:** Career counseling helps physicians find a life beyond — and after — medicine

diseases for 22 years, primarily in south metro Denver.

“I was still getting some chest pain while I was working, and I felt if I continued to work, I would not see retirement,” he said. “That was a very scary decision because I had done nothing but focus on medicine [since] ninth grade, so I didn’t know how to even begin thinking about a new career.”

Like every client who goes to PCN, Cox began the process with a face-to-face meeting where he aired his frustrations and interests.

Next, he took a couple of tests to define his personality, preferences and skills.

“What I did was I tore apart my life ... and analyzed the things I liked most and the things I disliked the most,” Cox said. “It helped me determine the things I wanted to have in my future. I found that whatever I did in the future had to contain medicine, speaking and travel, and so I looked at different opportunities that would allow me to combine those three.”

Weeks said it sometimes takes time convincing doctors that their training and expertise fit into other fields and that they can make good money without practicing medicine.

“It’s kind of thinking outside the box and what will truly represent the best use of their time and talents,” he said.

The next steps involve honing important job-finding skills.

“Physicians as a general rule are poor business people, and they are poor networkers, and they approach everything from a scientific point of view instead of from a business and social point of view,” Cox said.

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**Robert Cox**  
doctor

“What I learned at CareerLab was certain basic things like how to write a resume, how to write a letter of introduction. These are things I never had to do before.”

After six months, and a business plan, Cox landed a job as a professional speaker.

“I help medical and primarily nonmedical audiences understand how the biomedical developments that are taking place now and that will continue over the next several decades will change their world,” he said. “I love it. It’s absolutely perfect for me. It gives me flexibility, the stress level is lower and manageable. ... I can continue to do this as long as I want to.”

The service, however, does not come cheap. The base price is \$12,000. Additional services, including practice management and financial and legal help, cost extra.

Assuming a primary care physician makes about \$120,000 a year, that works out to slightly more than a month’s salary, said Bob Priddy, executive director of PCN.

“If we expedite your entire process by a month,” he said, “then we’ve paid for ourselves.”

Cox said he is not yet making the

money he did as a doctor.

“Fortunately I’m in a situation where with my wife’s income and the income I am able to generate, we’re doing fine. But when you start a new business as a sole proprietor, you start at the bottom and work your way up,” he said. “It won’t be long before I am able to exceed the income I had in medicine.”

Sick of seeing more patients for less money, Dr. Andrew Dombro of Louisville, Ky., is in the process of trying to create a career that combines his two loves—medicine and golf. Dombro, 44, wants to educate golfers and other people about general medical issues and those related to the sport.

“It’s not cheap, but it’s not overly expensive for what you get either,” he said. “You basically pay a pretty good chunk of money, but then you have these guys on retainer for forever really.”

Seeking a job with new challenges, Colorado Springs doctor James Hubbard is in the process of launching Family Doctor magazine. He is still practicing medicine part time.

“I like it quite a bit,” he said. “I feel more relaxed. I feel more energized.”

He is concerned, however, about the growing number of doctors choosing the same path he did — a way out of practicing medicine.

“It concerns me. It concerns me for my own family and health that doctors are getting more frustrated and leaving practice and not accepting new patients,” he said. “Some of the smarter and more talented people” are “going into other fields that are easier, more lucrative and [with] not as much red tape.”