Responding to Suffering: An Introduction to Mindful Practice and Mindful Communication (P10)

Ronald Epstein, MD, University of Rochester, Rochester, NY
Timothy E. Quill, MD FACP FAAHPM, University of Rochester Center for Experiential Learning, Rochester, NY

Objectives
- Describe the nature of suffering and the types of responses to it.
- Enact principles of mindful practice to enhance participants’ ability to respond effectively to suffering.

Palliative care, which promotes compassionate care amid serious illnesses, depends on practitioners’ ability to cultivate attentiveness, self-compassion, resilience, and mindfulness in their interactions with patients, families, and colleagues. AAHPM prioritizes “identifying opportunities for enhanced self-care and resilience” as a key objective for its Annual Assembly sessions. However, few structured opportunities exist for practitioners to develop self-awareness amid the unpredictability and stresses of clinical practice. This workshop will offer an experiential introduction to mindful practice—“moment-to-moment purposeful attentiveness to one’s own mental processes during every day work with the goal of practicing with clarity and compassion.” The format is based on intensive courses for health professionals, which have resulted in greater resilience, empathy, and psychosocial orientation while reducing burnout. We will introduce principles of mindful practice through formal and informal contemplative practices, narrative and appreciative inquiry exercises, and research on mindful practice training for clinicians—building on intellectual foundations outlined in two seminal articles in JAMA (Epstein, 1999; Krasner et al., 2009) and Academic Medicine (Beckman et al., 2012).

The workshop will address noticing suffering and responding to it, building on themes addressed in prior AAHPM sessions. After discussing principles of mindful practice, we will explore ways clinicians notice and respond to suffering including “fixing,” “compassionate solidarity,” and “transformation.” We will introduce brief secular, contemplative exercises to draw attention to bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings to promote self-awareness and awareness of one’s environment. A narrative reflective writing exercise will focus on personal clinical experiences related to suffering and “turning toward suffering”; participants will take turns telling and listening to each other’s stories using techniques of reflective questioning. Next we will address ways in which mindfulness can be applied to clinical practice. Finally there will be discussion about how to grow and sustain mindful practice in participants’ own work settings.