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WHA Hosts 2026 Physician Leadership Development Conference

Highlights communication, well-being strategies and current external challenges impacting physicians

Physician leadership teams from across WHA's membership gathered March 12 and 13 in Elkhart Lake for the annual WHA Physician Leadership Development Conference.



WHA 2026 Physician Leadership Development Conference attendees

The event mixed education for physician leaders at all stages of their career on current topical issues impacting Wisconsin physicians as well as skills, tools and ideas for physician leaders to help our physicians and organizations succeed in an ever-evolving health care landscape. As importantly, the conference provided a unique opportunity for medical executive committees and other physician leader teams to connect, share challenges and solutions, and network with their physician leader peers in Wisconsin.

The conference was headlined by Dr. Anthony Orsini, DO, FAAP, and Dr. Guarava Agarwal, MD, who each offered thoughtful, practical insights and tools for physician leaders on communications strategies and physician wellness strategies, respectively. WHA President and CEO Kyle O'Brien and WHA Senior Vice President of Workforce and Clinical Practice Ann Zenk each shared current health care challenges impacting Wisconsin physicians daily, as well as the latest data, drivers and trends on physician and clinical workforce across the state. As importantly, O'Brien and Zenk shared efforts to address these myriad challenges impacting Wisconsin physicians and clinicians.

A summary of each of the presentations is below.

Dr. Anthony Orsini – Leadership and Communication

Dr. Anthony Orsini, DO, FAAP, offered two sessions during the conference, both focusing on critical communication skills for leaders – *One Solution: Bringing Meaning Back to Healthcare Through the Power of Communication* and *Navigating Difficult Conversations: Leadership Workshop*.

Health care teams have an extraordinary opportunity to elevate both patient and clinician experience by focusing on the power of communication and human connection, emphasized Dr. Orsini. Noting that communication is one of the most influential elements of care—shaping trust, comfort and confidence within seconds, Dr. Orsini shared simple communication skills and behaviors such as being fully present, using warm body language and engaging with genuine curiosity that create a sense of safety and partnership remembered long after the encounter.

“As a society, we have confused the term information and the term communication,” explained Dr. Orsini. “Information is something you can put on a piece of paper. It's facts.



Dr. Anthony Orsini

Communication is when we connect and share feelings and ideas with someone else, when we're in sync."

Dr. Orsini highlighted how focusing on core communication skills and behaviors also strengthens not just the patient experience but the clinician experience as well. "When teams shift from task focused interactions to relationship-centered ones, clinicians report greater fulfillment and a renewed sense of purpose," said Orsini. These improvements stem from reconnecting with the "why" of medicine—helping people, building rapport and sharing authentic moments that remind physicians of the impact they make every day.

Dr. Orsini offered a practical path for physician leaders to help nurture and build effective communication and human connection skills to rebuild and restore trust, even in some of the most difficult and challenging situations. He shared the six-part "FRIEND" framework—**F**ocus on connection, **R**elationships before results, **I**ntention over efficiency, **E**ngage your purpose, **N**urture your team and **D**emonstrate humanity—noting that small, intentional actions such as sharing a personal detail, pausing before entering a room, or expressing appreciation to colleagues can transform both patient interactions and team dynamics.

His primary message for physician leaders: By championing communication as a core skill, physician leaders can foster environments where patients feel cared for, teams feel supported and the joy of practicing medicine becomes more visible and sustainable.

Dr. Guarava Agarwal, Chief Wellness Executive, Northwestern Medicine – Leadership and Physician Well-Being



Dr. Guarava Agarwal

Dr. Gaurava Agarwal, MD, who serves as the Chief Wellness Executive for Northwestern Medicine in Chicago, closed out the conference with the presentation – *Advancing Healthcare Professional Well-Being: An Organizational Approach*, sharing the multi-year journey of Northwestern Medicine's systemic efforts to comprehensively improve physician and clinician wellbeing.

Work determinants of clinician well-being are multi-factorial, explained Dr. Agarwal. "Where we work," including belonging, security and safety, "how we work," including workload, autonomy/flexibility, rest/recovery, technology/supplies and teamwork/communication, and "how we invest engage and develop," including growth leadership, total rewards and recognition/appreciation, are all unique factors that drive physician and clinician wellbeing and Northwestern Medicine's comprehensive well-being approach.

Given the multiple drivers of physician and clinician well-being, a key pillar of Northwestern Medicine's wellbeing approach has been developing its *Scholars of Wellness* program to develop "everyday leaders" throughout the organization. Described as a professional development engine, Dr. Agarwal shared how the *Scholars of Wellness* program equips clinician leaders with skills in change management, process improvement and well being science. By building internal "everyday leaders," Dr. Agarwal explained how the program has been a key catalyst cultural transformation—leading local projects, mentoring colleagues and strengthening team environments.

Dr. Agarwal highlighted that building leadership effectiveness throughout the organization is one of the strongest predictors of clinician well-being. Leaders who communicate clearly, recognize contributions, build trust and model healthy behaviors create teams that experience higher professional fulfillment and significantly lower burnout. Northwestern Medicine's data shows that when leadership behaviors are rated favorably, burnout is roughly half as prevalent and organizational satisfaction rises dramatically. This reinforced his central message on improving well-being: investing in your own leadership development is one of the most powerful ways to support your teams, strengthen the care environment and advance the mission of delivering exceptional patient care.

Kyle O'Brien, WHA President and CEO - State of Wisconsin Health Care

Kyle O'Brien

WHA President and CEO Kyle O'Brien shared key external challenges facing health care delivery that are impacting physicians and clinicians in Wisconsin, and efforts to address those challenges. He shared that understanding what these external challenges are can help equip physician leaders better in communicating to staff the "why" and "how" these external factors drive disruptions and change within their hospitals.

O'Brien provided eight take home messages that all physicians and physician leaders can share to help understand and impact our current challenging health care environment. These messages include: Payer mix and demographic challenges, impacts of government payers failing to pay the costs of care, the increasingly negative impacts of health care middlemen and the significant costs of "regulations that don't work." His presentation

included a short PowerPoint that physician leader attendees can utilize to help communicate these challenges to their peers.



Ann Zenk, WHA Senior Vice President, Workforce and Clinical Practice – Physician Workforce Highlights from WHA Workforce Report

WHA Senior Vice President of Workforce and Clinical Practice Ann Zenk kicked off the conference with a presentation on key data, drivers and trends on physician and clinical workforce in Wisconsin from the recently released 2026 WHA Health Care

Workforce Report. Zenk's presentation noted that while Wisconsin's health care workforce is growing and recovering from pre-pandemic levels, it is struggling to keep pace with surging demand driven by Wisconsin's aging population and a shrinking labor pool.

In addition to successes in efforts to increase and support physician workforce needs through state level public-private graduate medical education programs, the presentation also focused on prior authorization and other payer burdens that are increasingly pulling physicians away from patient care, exacerbating the patient demand challenges and increasing physician burnout.

For more information about the WHA Physician Leadership Development Conference, including information on next year's event on February 19-20 at the American Club in Kohler, [click here](#).



Ann Zenk

IN THIS ISSUE

- WHA Applauds State Legislature for Passing 'Next-of-Kin' Legislation, Sending Bill to Governor's Desk
- Advocacy Day 2026 Photo In-Review
- WHA Hosts 2026 Physician Leadership Development Conference
- WHA and Superior Health Leadership Gain Insight into CMS Quality Priorities at 2026 Conference
- Fast Facts from the WHA Information Center: March is Multiple Sclerosis Awareness Month

EDUCATION EVENTS

Mar. 31, 2026

WHA 2026 Wisconsin Health Care Workforce Webinar Series

Sep. 10, 2026

Caring for Wisconsin's Caregivers: 2026 WHA Healthcare Workforce Well-being Summit