

# Exploring Unconventional Clinical Careers: An Interview with Dr. Sylvie Stacy

Michael J. Sacopulos, JD, and Sylvie Stacy, MD, MPH

In an era when physician burnout is a significant concern, exploring alternative career paths within medicine has become increasingly important. Sylvie Stacy, MD, MPH, a board-certified preventive medicine physician, has dedicated her work to unveiling these less-traveled roads. In her latest book, *50 Unconventional Clinical Careers for Physicians: Unique Ways to Use Your Medical Degree Without Leaving Patient Care*, she provides a comprehensive guide to diverse clinical settings and practice types that many physicians may not have considered.

**KEY WORDS:** Physician burnout; unconventional careers, clinical practice; work-life balance; career satisfaction.

In this interview, hosted by Mike Sacopulos, Sylvie Stacy, MD, MPH, discusses the motivations behind her new book, shares examples of unconventional career paths, and offers advice for physicians seeking fulfilling alternatives within clinical medicine.

*This transcript of their discussion has been edited for clarity and length.*

**Mike Sacopulos:** Dr. Stacy, your first book, *50 Nonclinical Careers for Physicians*, provided an overview of major career areas outside of patient care. How does your new book differ from the previous one, and what motivated you to focus on unconventional clinical careers this time?

**Sylvie Stacy:** Great question. While my first book delved into nonclinical options — roles in the pharmaceutical industry, insurance, medical writing, and so forth — the new book shifts the focus back to clinical practice but in less traditional settings.

The core idea is that a medical degree opens doors to many more opportunities than most physicians realize. In medical school and residency, we're often funneled into traditional paths like hospital-based specialties or primary care. However, our training equips us with a broad skill set applicable in various unconventional clinical roles.

Many doctors don't realize the different settings in which physicians are needed simply because those aren't part of our usual rotations in large academic medical centers. My motivation was to illuminate these overlooked paths and help physicians find fulfilling alternatives within clinical medicine.

**Sacopulos:** Can you give us some examples of the unconventional career areas that you cover in your new book?

**Stacy:** Absolutely. The book covers a wide range of roles. For instance, physicians can work at university health centers, providing care to students and faculty, or run executive

health programs tailored to corporate leaders. There are opportunities in forensics and law enforcement, such as working with medical examiners or as consultants on criminal cases.

Some physicians practice in convenient care clinics located in retail settings or even on cruise ships, combining medicine with travel. Other areas include medical spas and aesthetic medicine, where physicians focus on cosmetic procedures, and clinical pharmacology roles that involve research and development of new medications.

Additionally, I discuss unconventional private practice models like cash-only practices and fully virtual practices, which offer more control over how physicians deliver care.

**Sacopulos:** You mentioned that you've had your own experiences in unconventional settings, specifically working in prison medicine. Can you tell us more about that and what drew you to this field?

**Stacy:** Certainly. Working in prison medicine has been one of the most interesting and rewarding aspects of my career. I began as a corporate medical director for a company providing healthcare services to correctional facilities — this was right out of residency. Initially, I knew the environment would be different, but it took time to appreciate how much those differences would enhance my career satisfaction.

I hadn't envisioned working in this area, but the opportunity aligned with my interests in preventive medicine. I thought, why not give it a try? If it didn't work out, I could pursue something else. However, it turned out to be a great fit, and I've been involved in correctional healthcare for over a decade now.

**Sacopulos:** What are some of the unique challenges and rewards of practicing medicine in a correctional setting?

**Stacy:** One primary difference is the patient population. Incarcerated individuals often have complex health needs,

including a mix of chronic conditions, acute issues, mental health disorders, and substance use disorders. Many have had limited access to healthcare prior to incarceration, leading to poorly managed conditions.

The physical environment also presents unique challenges. Providing care involves navigating security protocols and working closely with correctional staff. Adaptability is crucial, as medical emergencies can happen anywhere within the facility — from overdoses to injuries resulting from altercations.

Despite these challenges, one of the rewards is the opportunity to make a significant impact on a population that is often underserved and highly appreciative of the care they receive.

**Sacopulos:** Burnout is a significant issue among physicians today. How do you see unconventional clinical roles addressing this problem?

**Stacy:** Burnout is indeed a pervasive issue, with roughly half of physicians reporting symptoms. Contributing factors often include excessive work hours and a lack of control over one's work environment. Many physicians would accept less pay for better work-life balance, which speaks volumes about the need for change.

Unconventional clinical roles can offer competitive salaries without the intense demands typical of traditional settings. For example, telemedicine allows physicians to work from home, set their own schedules, and eliminate the stress of commuting. Other unconventional roles may provide more manageable work hours, greater autonomy, and a more satisfying work-life balance, all of which can mitigate burnout.

**Sacopulos:** Are there opportunities for physicians to engage in unconventional roles such as side gigs or part-time work?

**Stacy:** Yes, definitely. Several unconventional clinical jobs are perfect for physicians looking to supplement their income or gain experience alongside a full-time job. Medical directorships in non-traditional settings are a prime example. Physicians can serve as medical directors for medical spas, blood and plasma donation centers, emergency medical services, hospice agencies, and opioid treatment centers, among others.

These roles often involve overseeing medical protocols, ensuring compliance with regulations, and providing clinical guidance. Many of these positions offer flexible schedules, can be done part-time, or even remotely, making them suitable as side gigs.

**Sacopulos:** For physicians interested in exploring these unconventional opportunities, what strategies do you recommend for finding such roles?

**Stacy:** While networking remains valuable, especially when connecting with physicians already in unconventional roles, public job postings have become increasingly relevant. Job boards and aggregators like Indeed and LinkedIn

are excellent resources. These platforms often list positions from organizations that may not advertise on physician-specific job sites.

When using these sites, it's essential to experiment with keywords and filters to narrow down relevant opportunities. Being proactive and open-minded in your search can uncover a wealth of possibilities that might not be apparent through traditional networking alone.

**Sacopulos:** How can early-career physicians aiming for leadership roles benefit from pursuing unconventional clinical careers?

**Stacy:** Unconventional opportunities can be instrumental in developing leadership skills and gaining diverse experiences valuable for future leadership positions. For instance, in correctional medicine, there's a significant need for physicians to oversee medical services at facilities or within entire systems.

These roles often welcome physicians from various specialties and don't always require extensive prior leadership experience. By stepping into such positions, early-career physicians can manage medical programs, make critical decisions, and collaborate with multidisciplinary teams, all of which are foundational leadership experiences.

**Sacopulos:** For seasoned leaders, how does your book apply to them, especially in mentoring roles?

**Stacy:** Experienced leaders often serve as mentors, whether formally or informally. My book can be a resource for them to guide mentees who are exploring their career options.

It's important for mentors to recognize that the best path for a mentee might differ from traditional trajectories. Encouraging mentees to consider unconventional roles can help them find careers that align more closely with their personal goals and needs. By being aware of these diverse opportunities, seasoned leaders can provide more comprehensive guidance and support to the next generation of physicians.

**Sacopulos:** In closing, what message would you like to convey to physicians contemplating a move into an unconventional clinical career?

**Stacy:** I'd like to emphasize that it's okay to think outside the box and pursue paths less traveled. Your medical degree is a versatile tool that can open doors to a myriad of fulfilling careers beyond traditional practice settings. Whether you're seeking a better work-life balance, aiming to mitigate burnout, or looking to expand your professional horizons, unconventional clinical careers offer viable and rewarding options.

I encourage physicians to explore these possibilities, assess what aligns with their personal and professional goals, and take proactive steps toward a more satisfying career.

Sylvie Stacy's book, *50 Unconventional Clinical Careers for Physicians: Unique Ways to Use Your Medical Degree Without Leaving Patient Care*, is a valuable resource for

physicians at all stages of their careers. By shedding light on alternative paths within clinical medicine, Stacy empowers physicians to find roles that not only leverage their skills but also enhance their well-being and career satisfaction.

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