

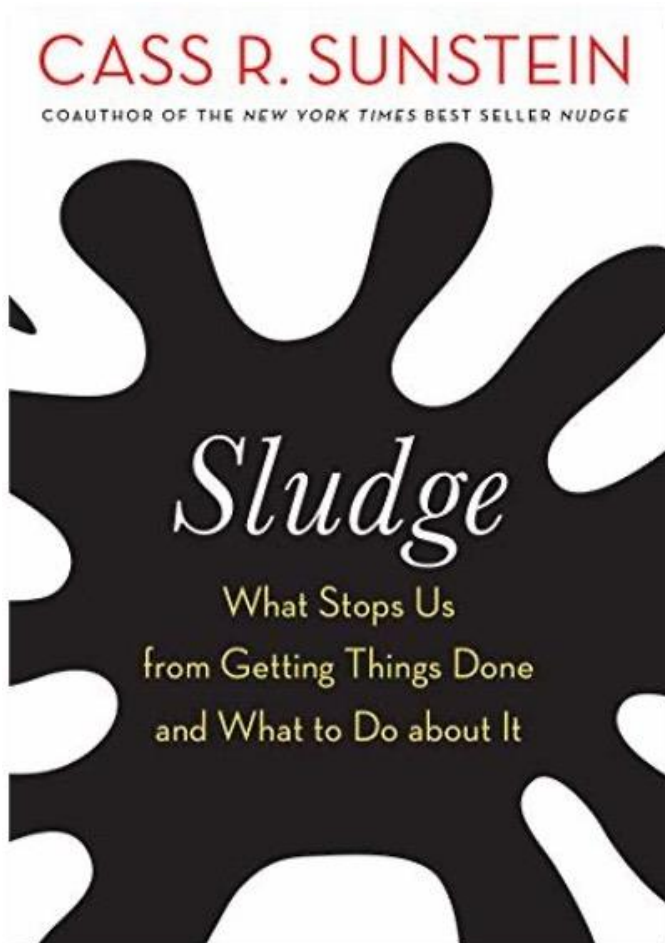
dear residents

Nudge, Sludge and Drudge

June 5, 2022

Dear Residents,

Dr. Jose Joglar and I are working on reducing the administrative burdens you face in residency training. These include all those mandatory modules and other nuisance processes you have to go through. We are developing an inventory of all the “required items” and will do our best to consolidate, minimize and streamline these time sinks. I get daily emails about who hasn’t completed this or that requirement and I cringe because I know you are just so pressed for time and simply need to prioritize patient care.



I recently finished reading a book by Cass Sunstein, “Sludge: What Stops Us from Getting Things Done and What to Do About it.” You may know Sunstein as one of the co-authors of “Nudge.” Excessive paperwork (including online “paperwork”) and the need to jump through hoops is a recipe for harm, frustration, and loss of productivity. Some of these are big societal problems that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable and exacerbate inequality – voting, food stamps, visas, etc. In our profession, we have our own hoops to jump through - licensure, credentialing, drug enforcement authority, preauthorization, coding, billing, appealing denials, etc.

Sludge is justified by those who create it for six main reasons:

1. Ensuring eligibility and program integrity – insurance, mortgages, residency applications, licensure.
2. Counteracting self-control problems – *do you really want to delete that file?*, waiting periods for firearm purchases.
3. Protecting privacy and security – collecting sensitive information, complex passwords, two-factor authentication, HIPAA and information security training.
4. Targeting benefits to those who most need or deserve them - financial assistance, food stamps, earned income tax credit, scholarships.
5. Collecting important or essential data – FAA, food safety, FDA, ACGME, MedHub, clinical trials, electronic health records.

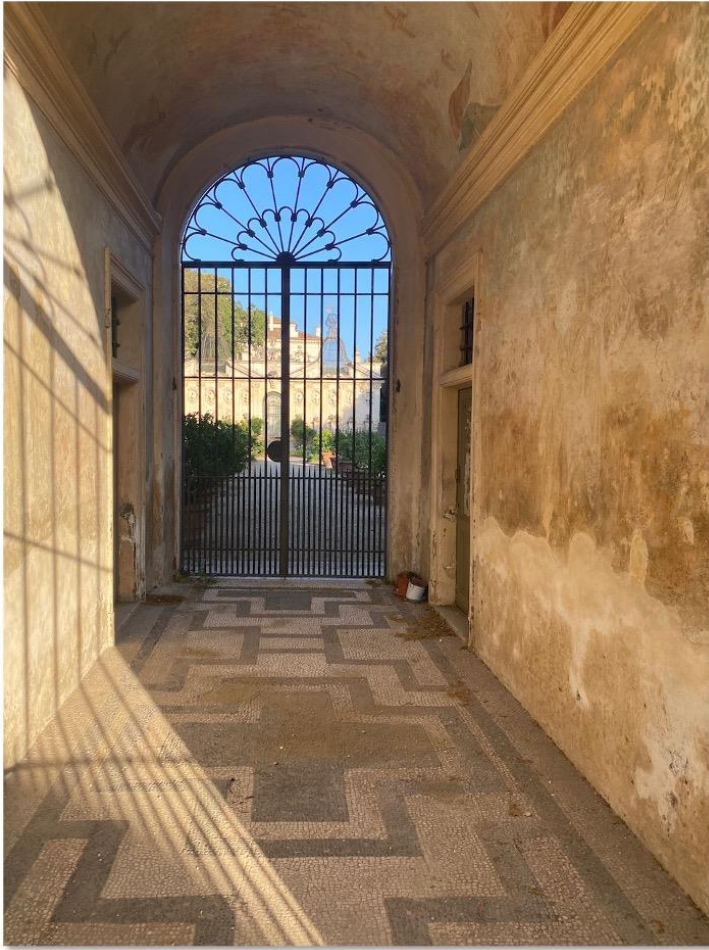
Sludge is different from a Nudge. Sludge is a barrier, a hoop, a hurdle, whereas a nudge is a strategy (choice architecture) to steer people towards beneficial choices – retirement programs, health insurance enrollment, wearing a seat belt, healthy foods placed in preferred locations etc.

We could certainly use nudges for some things that would benefit you. The ResQ app is one such nudge to ease the burden of recording your work hours. DocuSign has greatly eased signing documents. What if we automatically assigned you a PCP at the start of residency and created at least one resident wellness visit each year – you could opt-out, but the default appointment might reduce the inertia of making one. There are other areas that the program needs process improvement and good nudges in like evaluation delivery and completion. Perhaps we need a complete redesign (remove the sludge and construct a helpful nudge).

The pandemic witnessed grand-scale reduction in sludge – provisional FDA authorizations for COVID tests and vaccines, telehealth, drive through testing, the paycheck protection program and many other innovations that demonstrated how quickly we can get things done when they are urgently needed.

There is a lot of sludge in residency training which results in a fair share of drudgery – from the ERAS application process to onboarding, mask-fit testing and all the aforementioned mandatory modules. Some industries have found ways to reduce sludge – ordering on Amazon and the return process are very easy. Discontinuing a subscription to a magazine subscription or cable TV is tough on the other hand. Some sludge is nefarious – designed to keep you from walking away easily. Even with necessary sludge, there ought to be ways to reduce the burdens, ease completion, and reduce or eliminate barriers. Otherwise, we are at risk of simply giving up.

Your workday is full and should be focused on patient care, education and self-care. Paring away the unneeded stuff and improving access to the needed stuff would be a useful initiative. We have relentlessly accrued regulatory hurdles of dubious value. Embarking on a sludge audit seems like the right first step.



Villa Borghese, Rome, Italy

Warm regards,

Dino Kazi