

June 18, 2003

American Medical Association Renews Commitment to Fight Underage Drinking
Adopts Stronger Alcohol Policies at Annual Meeting

The American Medical Association, the nation's largest doctors' group, is calling for increased awareness about the harms caused by underage drinking, more research, and increased excise taxes on alcohol. Studies show that increased alcohol excise taxes can help reduce consumption, especially by underage drinkers.

At its annual meeting in Chicago in mid-June, the AMA's House of Delegates adopted stronger alcohol policies based on a report on the effects of alcohol on the brains of underage drinkers. Adolescence and college attendance are high-risk periods for initiating alcohol use and engaging in patterns of binge drinking. The report, which examined the physiological and medical consequences of drinking by young people, found that underage drinking is associated with brain damage – possibly permanent – as well as learning and memory deficits and impaired intellectual development.

(A summary of the report and the policies adopted by the AMA's House of Delegates are available at: <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/article/2036-7821.html>)

According to the new AMA policies, the organization will work with medical specialty societies – whose members provide care for adolescents and young adults – to create a higher level of awareness about the negative effects of underage drinking. The AMA is also encouraging increased medical and policy research in this area, including the design and implementation of environmental strategies to reduce youth access to, and high consumption of, alcohol.

At the annual meeting, several dozen physicians gathered to form an alcohol caucus to push these issues. The session was organized by the AMA's Office of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse, which administers two national programs – Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions and A Matter of Degree: The National Effort to Reduce High-Risk Drinking Among College Students – and the AMA's Council on Scientific Affairs, and was co-sponsored by 14 specialty societies and state medical associations.

“We have no interest in prohibition, but we are particularly concerned about the growing use of alcohol among adolescents,” said AMA President-elect John C. Nelson, MD, MPH, who led the meeting.