AMA: Don’t back down on diversity in medicine

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With the U.S. Supreme Court set to rule on two lawsuits seeking to undo affirmative action for institutions of higher learning, including medical schools, the House of Delegates adopted several policies amplifying the AMA’s support for diversity in medical education.

“Efforts to do away with affirmative action undermine decades of progress in creating a diverse physician workforce and will reverse gains made in the battle against health disparities,” said AMA President-elect Jesse M. Ehrenfeld, MD, MPH, ahead of his inauguration as president tonight at the 2023 AMA Annual Meeting in Chicago.

It’s necessary to “bolster the pool” of students from historically excluded racial and ethnic groups “who wish to pursue a career in medicine and the consideration of race is one of many parts of the equation—along with test scores, grades and interviews—when determining the mix of students that will result in a class of physicians best equipped to serve all of the nation’s patients,” Dr. Ehrenfeld said. “We cannot back down from efforts to boost the growing representation of talented and highly qualified medical students from historically marginalized groups.”

To that end, the House of Delegates modified existing AMA policy to:

- Urge medical school and undergraduate admissions committees to proactively implement policies and procedures that operationalize race-conscious admissions practices in admissions decisions, among other factors.
- Unequivocally oppose legislation that would dissolve affirmative action or punish institutions for properly employing race-conscious admissions as a measure of affirmative action in order to promote a diverse student population.

Delegates also adopted new policy to “recognize the consideration of race in admissions is a necessary safeguard in creating a pipeline to an environment within medical education that will propagate the advancement of health equity through diversification of the physician workforce.”

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Against legacy preferences as factor

In addition, delegates also adopted policy opposing the use of legacy status as a screening tool for medical school admissions due to its discriminatory outcomes. The new policy recognizes an applicant may voluntarily disclose legacy status during interviews as a reason for interest in a particular medical school, but the AMA stands against formal and specific legacy questions by medical schools in the application process.

“Preferential legacy admissions are yet another barrier for students from underrepresented groups for entry into medical school,” AMA Trustee Toluwalase Ajayi, MD, said. “Physicians’ children are 24 times more likely to become physicians than their peers, and yet our workforce does not consistently reflect the population of patients we serve. It is important to level the playing field for disadvantaged students who may not have the same resources or knowledge of medical school admissions through an equitable admissions process.”

In a separate action, delegates at the 2023 AMA Annual Meeting in Chicago modified existing AMA policy to:

- Publicly state and reaffirm its support for diversity in medical education and acknowledge the incorporation of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts as a vital aspect of medical training.
- Directly oppose any local, state or federal actions that aim to limit diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, curriculum requirements or funding in medical education.
- Advocate for resources to establish and maintain DEI offices at medical schools that are staff managed and student- and physician-guided as well as committed to longitudinal community engagement.
- Investigate the impacts of state legislation regarding DEI-related efforts on the education and careers of students, trainees and faculty.

Boost for diversity work

While most medical schools have DEI initiatives, the work supporting them often falls to faculty members and students from historically excluded racial and ethnic groups. This added burden can make education and career advancement more difficult without support or recognition.

Taking that into account, delegates adopted new policy to “recognize the disproportionate efforts by and additional responsibilities placed on minoritized individuals to engage in diversity, equity and inclusion efforts.”
Delegates also directed the AMA to collaborate with the Association of American Medical Colleges, the Liaison Committee on Medical Education and relevant stakeholders to encourage academic institutions to use DEI activities and community engagement as criteria for faculty and staff promotion and tenure.

“Ongoing efforts attacking DEI initiatives and opposing their funding hinders our common goal of creating a well-equipped and culturally responsible physician workforce,” said AMA Trustee Pratistha Koirala, MD, PhD. “DEI work at academic medical institutions is already hindered by limited financial support and limited dedicated staff. We must continue to support and build up these programs to create a safe and welcoming environment for medical students and staff.”

Read about the other highlights from the 2023 AMA Annual Meeting.