To thwart medical student burnout, make it easier to seek time off

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About half of U.S. medical students report experiencing burnout, and they are more likely than their same-age peers outside of medicine to experience depression or depressive symptoms, according to an AMA Council on Medical Education report presented at the 2023 AMA Annual Meeting in Chicago.

Results of a 2020 study of current medical students and recent graduates by the University of Michigan found that lack of time had negative impact on medical student access to mental health services, the council’s report notes. Four in 10 respondents to that study also indicated that their schedule did not leave them with enough time for personal or family life, another aspect of well-being.

When time off is needed, medical students generally have little recourse. Medical schools often lack standardized institutional policies for the implementation of excused absences. The level of disclosure required by the students, who may not feel comfortable sharing mental health concerns due to professional stigma, is an added barrier to the pursuit of well-being.

“The goal of undergraduate medical education and awarding of the medical degree is to ensure that medical students have acquired the knowledge, skills and professional behaviors that prepare them for a spectrum of career choices in medicine,” says the council report. “Medical schools need to create an educational environment that assures that graduating medical students meet the standards for achieving the medical degree with the flexibility to meet the individual needs of their students.”

To address this contributor to burnout among medical students, the AMA House of Delegates adopted new policy supporting a requirement that each medical school have policy defining:

- The number of days a medical student may be excused from each curricular component.
- The processes for using excused absences, providing alternative, timely means of achieving curricular goals when absent from a curricular component.

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Effective mechanisms to communicate these policies at appropriate times throughout the curriculum.

The newly adopted policy encourages medical schools “to create a mechanism by which at least some portion of such days can be used without requiring explanation.”

Far too many American medical students and physicians experience burnout. That’s why the AMA develops resources that prioritize well-being and highlight workflow changes as part of the AMA Recovery Plan for America’s Physicians.

Whether success means strengthening your leadership skills so your CV stands out or completing cutting-edge research while prepping for residency—the AMA has the resources you need, from M1 to Match. Learn more.

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