In a move to protect privacy and limit stigma, the AMA House of Delegates has created policy to ensure that only relevant mental health information would be used in licensing and credentialing.

Questions on physician applications for licensure and credentialing that seek mental health information are invasive and often irrelevant. Data from the American Psychiatric Association finds no evidence that physicians who are treated for mental illness are more likely to harm a patient than a physician who has not sought treatment, as noted in a resolution introduced by the Illinois delegation.

In spite of that, many initial and renewal applications for medical licenses and associated applications continue to compel physicians to disclose current or past mental health conditions.

That potential for punitive actions creates additional stigma around physician mental health and, potentially, causes physicians to forgo necessary treatment in an era where physician burnout, depression and suicide are all reaching alarming rates.

At the 2023 AMA Annual Meeting in Chicago, the House of Delegates moved to protect physicians from discrimination and confidentiality violations in the licensing, privileging and credentialing processes that these questions can create.

To help do that, delegates amended existing AMA policy to encourage:

- Specialty boards, hospitals and other organizations involved in credentialing or privileging, as well as state licensing boards, to take all necessary steps to assure the confidentiality of information contained on application forms for credentials.
- These entities to include in application forms only requests for information that can reasonably be related to medical practice.
- State licensing boards, specialty boards, hospitals and other organizations involved in credentialing or privileging to exclude from license application forms and associated application forms including credentialing or privileging application forms information that
refers to psychoanalysis, counseling or psychotherapy required or undertaken as part of medical training.

- State medical societies and national specialty societies to join with the AMA in efforts to change statutes and regulations to provide needed confidentiality for information collected by licensing boards and related organizations.
- State licensing boards, specialty boards, hospitals and other organizations involved in credentialing or privileging to require disclosure of physical or mental health conditions only when a physician is suffering from any condition that currently impairs their judgment or that would otherwise adversely affect their ability to practice medicine in a competent, ethical and professional manner, or when the physician presents a public health danger.
- Those state medical boards, specialty boards, hospitals and other organizations involved in credentialing/privileging that wish to retain questions about the health of applicants on medical licensing applications use language consistent with that recommended by the Federation of State Medical Boards, which reads, “Are you currently suffering from any condition for which you are not being appropriately treated that impairs your judgment or that would otherwise adversely affect your ability to practice medicine in a competent, ethical and professional manner? (Yes/No).”
- The AMA also will “work with the Federation of State Medical Boards, the American Hospital Association, the American Board of Medical Specialties, and state medical societies to develop policies and strategies to ensure that all new and renewal medical licensure and associated applications and application reference forms, privileging, credentialing and related applications and documentation will request or disclose only information that is reasonably needed to address the applicant’s current fitness to practice medicine and respect the privacy of physician’s protected health information.”

Reducing physician burnout is a critical component of the AMA Recovery Plan for America’s Physicians.

Far too many American physicians experience burnout. That’s why the AMA develops resources that prioritize well-being and highlight workflow changes so physicians can focus on what matters—patient care.

Find out more with the AMA Advocacy Resource Center issue brief on confidential care to support physician health and wellness (PDF).

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