AMA will educate doctors, public on how loneliness affects health

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Social isolation and loneliness have been recognized as significant public health concerns, adversely affecting mental well-being as well as quality of life.

But social isolation and loneliness does not only affect older adults—they affect people across the lifespan. This can contribute to a range of chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression and anxiety, according to a resolution introduced by the AMA Senior Physicians Section.

The AMA previously adopted policy identifying loneliness as a public health issue that affects people of all ages. U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy, MD, also recently released an advisory on the epidemic of loneliness and isolation to rally Americans to spend more time with each other in an increasingly divided and digital society.

To address this growing public health problem, delegates adopted new policy to “encourage research to assess how forming networks earlier in life helps to reduce loneliness and social isolation for adults, with a special focus on marginalized populations and communities with limited access to resources.”

The House of Delegates also directed the AMA to:

- Develop educational programs for health care professionals and the lay public regarding the significance of social isolation and loneliness to include promoting social connections through community-based programs and encouraging social participation through volunteering, civic engagement and community service.
- Promote enhancing access, including transportation, to health and social services.
- Work with other interested entities to develop tools and resources to help clinicians identify and address social isolation and loneliness as a social driver of health.
- Work collaboratively with state medical societies, community-based organizations, social service agencies and public health departments to promote social connections and enhance

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Kids’ mental health a national emergency

In separate action, delegates adopted policy that aims to address kids’ mental health as it represents a national emergency.


Moreover, the resolution says, visits for overall mental health conditions among all children and adolescents also accounted for the largest proportion of all pediatric visits in 2020, 2021 and in January 2022 than in 2019.

In addition, suicide is the second leading cause of death among patients 10–18 years old. Meanwhile, 20.1% of patients 12-17 years old had a depressive episode in the last three years. That compares with 15.7% in 2019.

“A large proportion of our children are not only facing mental health disorders but aren’t receiving treatment. We are in a crisis situation with children’s mental health, and we must come together as a nation to do everything possible to prioritize children’s mental, emotional and behavioral health and ensure they have access to the care they need,” said AMA Immediate Past President Jack Resneck, Jr., MD.

“Physicians play a vital role in identifying and treating children’s mental health disorders, and it is imperative that more physicians and mental health professionals are trained and available to fill the gaps that exist for children accessing mental health treatment,” Dr. Resneck added.

To help call greater attention and action to this growing concern, the House of Delegates adopted policy saying the AMA should, along with other interested parties, advocate:

- That children’s mental health and barriers to mental health care access for children represent a national emergency that requires urgent attention.
- For efforts to increase the mental health workforce to address the increasing shortfall in access to appropriate mental health care for children.


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Eliminate harm from social media

Additionally, delegates addressed the topic of social media use, highlighting that nearly three in five U.S. teen girls felt persistently sad or hopeless in 2021. This is the highest level reported over the past decade.

The American Psychological Association recently released a health advisory that recommends adults monitor social media use for most in early adolescence. Adolescents should also be screened for signs of problematic social media use that can impair their ability to engage in their daily roles.

U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Murthy also released an advisory on social media and youth mental health. While social media may offer some benefits, there are ample indicators that social media can pose a risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents. To that end, the advisory calls for urgent action by policymakers, technology companies, researchers, families and young people alike to gain a better understanding of the full impact of social media use as well as maximizing the benefits and minimizing the harms of social media platforms to create safer, healthier online environments to protect children.

Recognizing the benefits and harms, delegates directed the AMA to “study and make recommendations for teenage use of social media, including proposing model state and federal legislation as needed, with report back at the 2024 Annual Meeting.”