Working to make it OK for physicians to seek mental health care

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Tanya Albert Henry
Contributing News Writer
AMA News Wire

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Emergency physician Stefanie Simmons, MD, knows firsthand what it’s like to struggle with mental health and not feel as though it’s OK to get help for fear that it can damage a career you have worked so hard to build.

She describes herself as a generally happy person, but when she had her second child during her emergency medicine residency, she experienced postpartum depression.

“I was about to apply for a new job. I knew that I was about to apply for disability insurance. I knew that I was about to start, maybe, new state [licensure] applications. And from everything that I had heard from all of my colleagues and all of my teachers was that having a formal diagnosis or treatment on your books could be damaging to your prospects for all of those things,” Dr. Simmons said during an episode of “AMA Update.”

Consequently, she didn’t seek care and to this day she knows that she suffered longer than she would had she felt comfortable getting the care she needed.

Now the chief medical officer for the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes’ Foundation—created after the New York emergency medicine physician died of suicide shortly after COVID-19 hit—she doesn’t want other physicians to experience the same barriers.

Nearly two dozen state medical boards have made changes to their licensing applications to help support physicians who seek care for mental health or a substance-use disorder.

States have changed their licensure applications as organizations such as the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes’ Foundation, the AMA and the Federation of State Medical Boards have pushed for officials to take a look at the questions they ask physicians seeking licensure and to eliminate or reword intrusive questions.

Officials in at least a dozen other states are working to make changes to questions on their licensure applications so that physicians don’t feel like they cannot seek help.


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“There is a whole team of people across the country who are pulling and trying to do this work to make your life, and your job, and your life at your job better,” Dr. Simmons said.

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.

**Advocating for change**

After her experience more than a decade ago, Dr. Simmons recognized that others were going through similar situations and started working locally to help other physicians. She coached and talked to those struggling with interacting with patients, their team or colleagues.

“What you often find is burnout or mental health. And, so, I found myself, instead of just coaching on communication, actually helping connect people with resources in the medical group that I was working in at the time, in the hospital and health system that I was working at the time, and really scratching the surface and uncovering a well of need in health care for additional resources—but also to help start to break down the stigmatizing language that exists in state medical licensing and hospital credentialing questions,” Dr. Simmons said.

**Taking the work national**

Dr. Simmons, who also serves as vice president of clinician engagement for the Nashville-based national medical group Envision Healthcare, was recently in Washington, D.C. to meet with lawmakers about physician well-being, an issue that crosses party lines and state lines.

“Every person on Capitol Hill has a hospital in their district, has health care workers in their district and has potential patients as their constituents,” she said. “So, everyone cares about the issue being address in a way that make substantial difference and change.”

As more hospitals, health systems and states tackle physician mental health issues and licensure questions and credentialing questions that probe mental health, there is an increasing amount of evidence to show what it takes to make positive changes that make a difference for health care workers, health systems and, ultimately, patients.
The AMA is advocating in many ways to support the mental health of medical students, residents and physicians, including ensuring that state licensing, credentialing, employment and other related applications do not contain stigmatizing language that inappropriately asks about past diagnoses or treatment for mental health or a substance-use disorder.

“If there’s an issue that’s important to you, write your Congressperson. If there’s legislation that’s up for a vote, let your representative know that it’s important to you, why it’s important to you and how it impacts your life and the life of the patients you serve,” she said. “The voices of health care workers are immensely valuable.”

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