Medical boards must avoid contributing to mental health stigma

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Research has found that many state medical boards persist in probing licensure applicants about their history of treatment for mental health instead of focusing on their current fitness to practice, despite recommendations to the contrary from the AMA, the American Psychiatric Association, Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB) and others.

Such questions can deter physicians from accessing needed care and contribute to the stigma around mental health care.

Given that, at the 2018 AMA Annual Meeting in Chicago the AMA House of Delegates (HOD) amended existing policy to:

- Encourage state licensing boards to require disclosure of physical or mental health conditions only when a physician is suffering from any condition that currently impairs his or her judgment or that would otherwise adversely affect his or her ability to practice medicine in a competent, ethical, and professional manner, or when the physician presents a public health danger.

The HOD also directed the AMA to:

- Advocate the following wording—recommended by the FSMB—in instances where state medical boards wish to retain questions about the health of applicants on medical licensing applications: “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).”

“We are deeply concerned that physicians and physicians-in-training are oftentimes discouraged from seeking mental health services because they are afraid that publicly disclosing a mental health issue would unfairly stigmatize them and impede their ability to obtain a medical license,” said AMA
Immediate Past President David O. Barbe, MD, MHA.

“Too many of our physician colleagues are dealing with burnout, depression and even suicidal thoughts—with physicians facing a higher rate of suicide than the general population,” Dr. Barbe added. “We must do everything we can to improve physician wellness and eliminate any barriers that stand in the way of physicians accessing needed mental health care services so they can have more meaningful and rewarding professional experiences and provide the best possible care to their patients.”

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