New AMA anti-harassment policies the right step for the profession

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The American Medical Association understands that inappropriate conduct can happen anywhere, and we are deeply committed to ensuring that everyone in our medical community feels safe and is free of harassing behavior in the workplace, at conferences and at AMA-sanctioned events.

Medicine, and all professions, must operate with zero-tolerance for any type of harassment, which is why the AMA House of Delegates and Board of Trustees have taken a number of steps in recent years to strengthen policies and procedures to better maintain safe and welcoming environments for all.

Responding to concerns expressed two years ago, the AMA Board proposed, and the House adopted, a comprehensive anti-discrimination policy at its 2017 Annual Meeting, extending the AMA’s zero-tolerance employee policy to all attendees of its meetings and functions—even volunteers.

The AMA Board took steps to further implement this policy in June 2018, and our House of Delegates in turn adopted detailed reporting, investigation and enforcement mechanisms to address claims of harassment. This included adding a phone hotline and website through which AMA delegates, members and meeting attendees may confidentially report witnessing or experiencing harassment at AMA meetings or events.

To further strengthen our policy, our House of Delegates at the 2018 AMA Interim Meeting adopted a resolution for engagement of outside consultants to help ensure that our anti-harassment policy is rooted in the high standards we expect from the medical community and consistent with best practices. We engaged two separate consultants—both national experts in this area—to evaluate our anti-harassment policies and procedures. The results of their joint evaluation, and the Board’s recommendations, will be reviewed at our AMA Annual Meeting in June.

While the consultants noted that the AMA’s existing policy “includes many of the critical elements of
an effective anti-harassment policy,” they also identified opportunities to bring our implementation and enforcement procedures fully in line with current best practices. Importantly, our recommendations include simpler ways to report alleged violations, processes to more promptly investigate and resolve claims, changes to ensure investigation independence and avoid conflicts of interests, and greater flexibility in procedures and processes.

The AMA Board strongly supports implementing these recommendations (Board Report 10) to raise the AMA Code of Conduct, including our anti-harassment enforcement procedures, to the highest standards. But we certainly welcome further discussion and deliberation at the 2019 AMA Annual Meeting.

While harassment can happen anywhere and at any time, it’s particularly troubling in medicine because of our commitment to good health and emotional well-being. The AMA Code of Medical Ethics forbids sexual harassment, for example, because it abuses the rights and trust of others, creates a hostile or intimidating work environment, and undermines patient care. This behavior is unacceptable and has no place in medicine or society.

At every AMA meeting in 2019—beginning with the State Advocacy Summit in January and continuing through to the Interim Meeting in November—you’ll see heightened visibility about the AMA Code of Conduct and reminders of expected behavior, on posters, flyers, our website and meeting apps.

**Professional. Ethical. Welcoming. Safe.**

The AMA is recognized around the world as a leader in medical research, engagement and advocacy; we must continue to lead on this issue as well. It’s incumbent upon us to set an example by adopting the best practices for identifying and eliminating harassment wherever it exists in the profession – and that work starts in our own House of Medicine.