What’s needed to improve physician diversity pipeline programs?

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The constitution of a physician body that is not representative of the nation’s patient population has consequences. Health inequities experienced by minority communities are often exacerbated by the lack of underrepresented minorities working as professionals in health and biomedical science fields, says a resolution adopted by the AMA House of Delegates (HOD).

Efforts to increase physician diversity at a grassroots level, known as pipeline or pathway programs, have been a priority for the AMA. At the 2019 AMA Annual Meeting, delegates called for a better understanding of the best practices associated with these programs.

“Studies show that patients prefer receiving health care from and have better health outcomes when they can relate to, understand and share similar backgrounds with their doctors,” said AMA Board Member S. Bobby Mukkamala, MD. “That’s why the AMA is committed to efforts aimed at ensuring medical schools are building a diverse pipeline of physicians whose racial and ethnic backgrounds reflect the actual needs of patients.

“One big way to advance health equity is to promote greater diversity among medical school applicants and enrollees,” Dr. Mukkamala added. “We will continue to support and improve pipeline programs because we know they are an effective way to help ensure there are enough physicians being trained to better reflect patients in the communities they serve.”

The HOD directed the AMA to:

- Support the publication of a white paper chronicling health care career pipeline programs (also known as pathway programs) across the nation aimed at increasing the number of programs and promoting leadership development of underrepresented minority health care professionals in medicine and the biomedical sciences, with a focus on assisting such programs by identifying best practices and tracking participant outcomes.
Work with various stakeholders, including medical and allied health professional societies, established biomedical science pipeline programs and other appropriate entities, to establish best practices for the sustainability and success of health care career pipeline programs.

Understanding the applicant pool

With 133 out of 141 American medical schools using the Association of American Medical Colleges’ (AAMC) electronic medical school application, there is an opportunity to obtain data to better understand the pool of potential applicants and improve that pool's diversity in the future.

To do that, the AMA will “work with the AAMC and other stakeholders to create a question for the AAMC electronic medical school application to identify previous pipeline program (also known as pathway program) participation and create a plan to analyze the data in order to determine the effectiveness of pipeline programs.”