Congress told impact of immigrant children’s trauma may be lifelong

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Andis Robeznieks
Senior News Writer

What’s the news: AMA urges Congress and the Trump administration to work with medical and mental health experts to ensure that the health of families and children seeking refuge in the U.S. is protected throughout the immigration process.

This recommendation was made in a statement delivered to the U.S. House Oversight and Reform Committee in advance of its hearings, “Kids in Cages: Inhumane Treatment at the Border” and “The Trump Administration’s Child Separation Policy: Substantiated Allegations of Mistreatment.”

Why it matters to patients and physicians: The ill health effects caused by the traumatizing conditions experienced by children in Customs and Border Protection (CBP) custody can last a lifetime.

“Families seeking refuge in the U.S. already endure emotional and physical stress, which is only exacerbated when they are separated from one another or held in family detention facilities during the pendency of their immigration proceedings,” AMA Executive Vice President and CEO James L. Madara, MD, wrote in a letter to committee leaders. “It is well known that childhood trauma and adverse childhood experiences created by inhumane treatment often create negative health impacts that can last an individual’s entire lifespan.”

The statement also states how traumatizing conditions such as insufficient food and water, extreme temperatures and constant light exposure “are simply not appropriate places for children or for pregnant women.”

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This is not a new position of the AMA. The statement issued to the committee reflects policies adopted by the AMA House of Delegates at the 2017 and 2018 AMA Annual Meetings. The policies oppose the separation of parents from their children and support humane treatment of all undocumented children.

In September the administration released a proposed rule expanding the long-term detention of migrating families. Consistent with these policies, the AMA opposed the proposal and has demanded oversight of detention facilities.

**What’s next:** The AMA and several medical specialty societies are strongly supporting H.R. 3239, the “Humanitarian Standards for Individuals in Customs and Border Protection Custody Act,” as a necessary first step to ensure adequate health care, food and water, sanitation and shelter for individuals in CBP custody.

The AMA also urges Congress and the administration to make it a priority to support families and protect the well-being of children within those families throughout the immigration process.