

How border conditions threaten our nation's decency, health

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What's in the news: AMA President Patrice A. Harris, MD, MA, has issued a clarion call to the country to avoid turning a blind eye to the inhumane conditions among people claiming asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border who are being held in detention: open toilets, around-the-clock lighting, not enough food and water, extreme temperatures, severe overcrowding and no access to basic hygiene.

"Our nation cannot turn our backs on the thousands of children and families whose lives have been torn apart by our government's draconian approach to immigration; this will have negative physical and mental health impacts for generations to come. To ignore this crisis is to lose sight of the humanitarian values and decency that comprise the core of the American experience," Dr. Harris wrote in an op-ed published today on the *Healthline* website as the AMA House of Delegates gathers at the 2019 AMA Interim Meeting held in that border city.

Why it matters for patients and physicians: America's physicians object to the awful conditions in U.S. immigration detention centers not only because of the suffering experienced by the asylum-seeking adults and children, Dr. Harris wrote. Rather, the chorus of concern rises "with our full society in mind."

The U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has policy, for example, to withhold influenza vaccination from the people in its custody. That "has implications beyond detention facilities by increasing the likelihood of flu outbreaks outside their walls," Dr. Harris wrote.

"Without access to widely available vaccines, the conditions under which detainees are held in Southern California and elsewhere pose an increased risk of respiratory infections like influenza, not just for detainees, but for facility staff, their families and the broader community."

The AMA and other leading national health organizations have called for oversight hearings to examine the "the immediate and long-term health implications of these practices," Dr. Harris wrote. "We have called upon the administration to allow asylum-seekers and their children to receive the most basic level of medically appropriate care, including vaccinations, in a way that is respectful of

their culture and country of origin.”

What’s next: Physicians, bound by the *AMA Code of Medical Ethics*, are “deeply committed to ensuring the health and well-being of all individuals, regardless of their citizenship status,” Dr. Harris wrote. It is time for the White House and Congress to work together with the AMA and the entire house of medicine to put and to these “these harmful immigration policies and to prioritize sound emotional and physical health for children and families throughout the immigration process.”