Physicians’ ethical responsibility to provide competent care is fluid and context-dependent at different phases of their careers, according to an AMA Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs report adopted at the 2019 AMA Interim Meeting.

“The ethical responsibility of competence requires that physicians at all stages of their professional lives be able to recognize when they are and when they are not able to provide appropriate care for the patient in front of them or the patients in their practice as a whole,” says the report.

According to the newly adopted ethical policy, individual physicians and physicians-in-training should strive to:

- Cultivate continuous self-awareness and self-observation.
- Recognize that different points of transition in professional life can make different demands on competence.
- Take advantage of well-designed tools for self-assessment appropriate to their practice settings and patient populations.
- Seek feedback from peers and others.
- Be attentive to environmental and other factors that may compromise their ability to bring appropriate skills to the care of individual patients and act in the patient’s best interest.
- Maintain their own health, in collaboration with a personal physician, in keeping with ethics guidance on physician health and wellness.
- Intervene in a timely and appropriate manner when a colleague’s ability to practice safely is compromised by impairment, in keeping with ethics guidance on physician responsibilities to impaired colleagues.

“Medicine as a profession should continue to refine mechanisms for assessing knowledge and skill and should develop meaningful opportunities for physicians and physicians in training to hone their ability to be self-reflective and attentive in the moment,” the advice concludes.