Pandemic rekindles urgent need for medical student debt relief

JUN 15, 2020

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The AMA has long advocated for legislative action to ease the debt burden incurred by medical students. The demands of the COVID-19 pandemic pressed hundreds of fourth-year medical students into front-line service prior to graduation, where they have now been joined by the balance of their peers to help relieve the most challenging public health emergency of our lifetimes.

The time has come to extend a measure of relief to these and other medical professionals in the form of expanded student-loan forgiveness, tuition relief efforts, and increased funding for scholarships and grant programs.

The need is clear. More than three-fourths of all medical school students graduate with a median debt load of about $200,000 related to medical training, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges. The median level of medical student debt has roughly doubled over the past two decades, according to data compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics.

For many medical school graduates, the ability to pay off these loans becomes even more challenging due to a number of factors. For example, medical students—like others pursuing advanced degrees—pay higher interest rates than undergrads. Also, interest begins accruing right away; there is no deferment of interest while schooling takes place, as occurs with many types of undergraduate student loans.

The AMA continues to enthusiastically back a broad range of initiatives designed to relieve the crushing burden of medical education and training debt. Several AMA-supported measures are now pending in Congress to achieve these goals, as outlined below:

We support provisions of the Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act as passed by the U.S. House of Representatives earlier this month, which would provide an additional $30 billion for the loan-repayment and scholarship programs administered by the National Health Service Corps (NHSC).
This action would bolster the ranks of medical professionals in underserved communities nationwide, with a particular emphasis on communities of color that have historically lacked access to health care resources and have suffered higher rates of infection and death as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The HEROES Act would also boost annual funding of the NHSC from $310 million to $1 billion, with a corresponding increase in both scholarship and loan-forgiveness awards.

The AMA is also urging Congress to pass the Student Loan Forgiveness for Frontline Health Workers Act, (H.R. 6720), which would offer complete loan forgiveness to physicians, residents and medical students who are putting their own lives on the line to provide COVID-19 care.

Another measure pending in Congress that has drawn our support is the Rural America Health Corps Act (S. 2406), which would—among other provisions—provide up to five years of student-loan forgiveness for joining the NHSC, instead of the standard two years.

During this pandemic, and well after we have brought it to an end, the physicians and other medical professionals who have so selflessly risked their own lives, as well as the lives of their families and loved ones, should be able to focus solely on delivering the best possible medical care to the greatest number of people—as opposed to worrying about how they will repay the student loans that enabled them to deliver this care in the first place.

At the same time, the legislative remedies described here will also ameliorate the crisis of health care inequities across our nation by encouraging more physicians and other professionals to apply their expertise in both rural and underserved urban areas. This will have both an immediate and long-term impact in improving the health of our nation, which has been at the core of the AMA’s mission for more than 170 years.

URL: https://www.ama-assn.org/about/leadership/pandemic-rekindles-urgent-need-medical-student-debt-relief
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