

PA rebrand as “physician associates” will deepen patient confusion

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The AMA House of Delegates has come out against the effort to rebrand the health-professional role of physician assistant as “physician associate,” saying the move taken recently by the American Academy of PAs (AAPA) will perplex patients seeking the benefit of physicians’ team leadership and superior training.

During the June 2021 AMA Special Meeting, delegates directed the AMA to “actively oppose” the name change. In addition, the AMA will “actively advocate that the stand-alone title ‘physician’ be used only to refer to doctors of allopathic medicine (MDs) and doctors of osteopathic medicine (DOs), and not be used in ways that have the potential to mislead patients about the level of training and credentials of nonphysician health care workers.”

AMA Immediate Past President Susan R. Bailey, MD, explained the name change’s likely negative impact.

“Changing the title of ‘physician assistants’ will only serve to further confuse patients about who is providing their care, especially since AAPA sought a different title change in recent years, preferring to only use the term ‘PA,’” Dr. Bailey said in a written statement.

The latest PA branding effort—which follows years of study by an international marketing and communications firm—“will undoubtedly confuse patients and is clearly an attempt to advance their pursuit toward independent practice,” Dr. Bailey said.

She added that the AMA believes the name change is incompatible with state laws. The AMA, Dr. Bailey said, is “prepared to work with interested state and specialty medical societies to address any efforts to implement this title change in state or federal policy.”

Survey: Many patients unclear on PAs

PAs are a pivotal part of many physician-led health care teams, but confusion about their role is longstanding. About one-quarter of patients wrongly believe that physician assistants are physicians or are unsure, according to AMA survey research on truth in advertising. Meanwhile, 45% of patients say it's hard to identify who's a licensed physician or that they don't know.

“We are strongly committed to supporting physician-led health care teams that use the unique knowledge and valuable contributions of all health care professionals to enhance patient outcomes,” Dr. Bailey said. “It is also what patients want, which is why clarity in health care titles is so important. That is why the AMA has advocated in support of truth-in-advertising laws and stands in strong opposition to AAPA's title change.”

Patients deserve care led by physicians—the most highly educated, trained and skilled health professionals. Through research, advocacy and education, the AMA vigorously defends the practice of medicine against scope-of-practice expansions that threaten patient safety.

In 37 states, PAs are supervised by physicians. In 11 other states, PAs must have a collaborative agreement with physicians. In Michigan, PAs must work with a participating physician according to the terms in a written practice agreement.

In nearly all states, PA scope of practice is determined with the supervising or collaborating physician at the practice site. Legislation that would have replaced physician supervision with a weakened definition of collaboration were defeated in Colorado, South Dakota and Texas. In two other states, legislation was favorably amended to retain physician supervision (Florida) or collaboration (Tennessee) of physician assistants.

Read about the other highlights from the June 2021 AMA Special Meeting.