

## 5 evidence-based steps to end the overdose epidemic

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**What's the news:** An AMA-convened expert task force is laying out evidence-based recommendations to help prevent deaths happening in a new phase of the overdose epidemic that is driven by illicit fentanyl, fentanyl analogs, methamphetamine and cocaine.

The task force's recommendations call for:

- Supporting patients with pain, mental illness or a substance-use disorder (SUD) by building an evidence-based, sustainable and resilient infrastructure and health care workforce.
- Removing barriers to evidence-based treatment for SUDs, co-occurring mental illness and pain.
- Supporting coverage for, access to, and payment of comprehensive, multidisciplinary, multimodal evidence-based treatment for patients with pain, a substance-use disorder or mental illness.
- Broadening public health and harm-reduction strategies to save lives from overdose, limit the spread of infectious disease, eliminate stigma and reduce harms for people who use drugs and other substances.
- Improving stakeholder and multisector collaboration in an effort to ensure that the patients, policymakers, employers and communities benefit from evidence-based decisions.

“Our AMA's primary goal with this work is to reduce the number of people dying from a drug-related overdose and improve the outcomes for patients with pain, with a mental illness or a substance-use disorder,” Bobby Mukkamala, MD, chair of the AMA Board of Trustees, said during a recent episode of “AMA Moving Medicine.”

**Why it's important:** The recently issued “2021 Overdose Epidemic Report” details how the public health crisis is being driven by illicit drugs, as illustrated by data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Overdoses and deaths are spiking, the report and a new AMA data dashboard show, even though opioid prescribing nationwide dropped 44.4% in the past decade and fell nearly 7% from 2019 to 2020.

The AMA Substance Use and Pain Care Task Force—also chaired by Dr. Mukkamala—promotes evidence-based policy to help end the drug-related overdose and death epidemic. The task force’s name reflects an evolution of the AMA’s advocacy work to help physicians treat patients with pain and prevent overdose deaths.

The AMA convened two task forces between 2014 and 2019 that provided actionable recommendations and principles for physicians, state and federal policymakers, and other stakeholders. As the overdose report details, physicians have reduced opioid prescriptions, greatly increased use of state prescription drug-monitoring programs to more than 910 million in 2020, and they continue to enhance their education. Yet, the epidemic has become worse due to many complicated factors, including the continued barriers posed by the 2016 CDC opioid-prescribing guidelines, health insurance company barriers to SUD care, and more.

Now the AMA has united the task forces to launch a collective effort to address this changing epidemic, including a heightened focus on removing health inequities, building a public health infrastructure, and urging policymakers and other stakeholders to pursue evidence-based solutions rather than ones that simply restrict access to care.

“The name may have changed, but this task force continues the work of promoting policies that will improve outcomes and save lives,” Dr. Mukkamala, a Flint, Michigan, otolaryngologist, said in an AMA statement.

Of the task force’s recommendations, Dr. Mukkamala said no single one of them represents “a panacea, but taken as a whole, they would move our country in the right direction.”

**Learn more:** Find state- and specialty-specific resources at the AMA's End the Epidemic website, explore overdose-related data metrics on the AMA’s overdose data dashboard, and read about the inspiring physicians who are helping patients with SUDs or chronic pain.

The End the Epidemic website was recognized by the Academy of Interactive and Visual Arts. As part of that organization's 27th Annual Communicator Awards, End the Epidemic was honored with an Award of Excellence in the Cause & Awareness website category.

“AMA Moving Medicine” highlights innovation and the emerging issues that impact physicians and public health today. You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version, which also features educational presentations and in-depth discussions.