

AMA seeks more help for medical students, residents with disabilities

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Nearly one in 20 medical students has a disability, according to 2019 data. That proportion, which has been on the rise in recent years, represents an opportunity to create a more diverse physician workforce that can introduce new approaches to care.

“Improved education about disability coupled with the opportunity to learn directly from peers with disabilities in the medical education setting can challenge existing beliefs about disabilities and increase awareness of the potential of both patients and physicians with disabilities,” says an AMA Council on Medical Education report whose recommendations were adopted at the November 2021 AMA Special Meeting.

The share of medical students with disabilities rose two percentage points between 2016 and 2019. Yet despite protections afforded by the Americans with Disabilities Act, medical students and resident physicians with disabilities face structural and cultural barriers to success.

“The AMA strongly supports efforts to increase the diversity of our future physician workforce,” said AMA Trustee Drayton Charles Harvey, fifth-year MD-PhD student. “By examining the roadblocks that medical students and trainees with disabilities often face, we can prioritize inclusion, eliminate stigmatization, and change the medical education experience.”

In an effort to create a more inclusive learning environment, the House of Delegates directed the AMA to:

- Urge that all medical schools and graduate medical education (GME) institutions and programs create, review, and revise technical standards, concentrating on replacing “organic” standards with “functional” standards that emphasize abilities rather than limitations, and that those institutions also disseminate these standards and information on

how to request accommodations for disabilities in a prominent and easily found location on their websites.

Encourage the National Board of Medical Examiners, National Board of Osteopathic Medical Examiners, and member boards of the American Board of Medical Specialties and the American Osteopathic Association to evaluate and enhance their processes for reviewing requests for accommodations from applicants with disabilities in order to reduce delays in completion of licensing and initial board-certification examinations. This should include an assessment of the experience of those applicants and the development of a transparent communication process that keeps applicants informed about the expected timeline to address their requests. These processes should require neither proof of accommodation nor proof of poor academic performance prior to the time at which a need for accommodation was requested.

Encourage research and broad dissemination of results in the area of disabilities accommodation in the medical environment that includes: the efficacy of established accommodations; innovative accommodation models that either reduce barriers or provide educational approaches to facilitate the avoidance of barriers; impact of disabled learners and physicians on the delivery of health care to patients with disabilities; and research on the safety of established and potential accommodations for use in clinical programs and practice.

The AMA also will urge all medical schools and GME institutions to:

Make available to students and trainees a designated, qualified person or committee trained in the application of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and available support services.

Encourage students and trainees to avail themselves of any needed support services.

Foster a supportive and inclusive environment where students and trainees with disabilities feel comfortable accessing support services.

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