Medical students craft care packages for new moms in Detroit area

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Among developed nations, the U.S. is one of three countries in which maternal mortality rates are rising. And the health inequities experienced by women from historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups cannot be explained away by insurance status and income.

Aware of that fact, medical students in Michigan aimed to tackle those inequities head on with a series of events aimed at awareness and aid. Taking place in early December, one portion of the work allowed medical students to create care packages for new mothers from economically and socially marginalized communities.

“I wanted women to feel supported and cared for during this vulnerable period,” said Leah Rotenbakh, a second-year medical student at Oakland University William Beaumont School of Medicine, who led the project. “The advocacy opportunities we engaged in will hopefully benefit women in the long run by affecting policy. But I thought a small, tangible difference could come in the form of care packages for new moms with supplies that they may not otherwise think to purchase, but that may help them in the first few months of motherhood.”

Read more from AMA Immediate Past President Susan R. Bailey, MD, about why our Black maternal health crisis is an American tragedy.

Taking action

Rotenbakh became aware of the discouraging maternal mortality statistics through her involvement with the Michigan State Medical Society and the AMA. To address it, she created a four-part series on the topic of infant and maternal mortality at her medical school, which is in the Detroit suburb of Rochester, Michigan.
The initial phases of the series involved lectures from physicians working in women’s health and briefs on policy efforts to address the problem. The care packages were a more proactive step in the series, Rotenbakh said.

“I hope that this series would encourage medical students, as future providers, to confront and learn about their own implicit biases in order to provide quality care for their patients,” Rotenbakh said. “Furthermore, life-course socioeconomic disadvantages and stress processes have been proven to be involved in morbidity and mortality for mothers and infants.”

Learn about the AMA’s sweeping plan to address maternal health care inequities.

**A group effort**

To fund the packages, Rotenbakh relied on grants from her medical school, the AMA Medical Student Outreach Program and the Michigan State Medical Society.

Care packages were created by five different medical schools in the state. Each school identified an organization or hospital system to partner with that best addressed the needs of their community. Students from Oakland partnered with the WIN Network, a nonprofit organization centered on addressing health inequities for women and infants from historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups, working with them to disseminate the care packages.

Care packages included dermaplast spray for postpartum pain, feminine hygiene products and basics such as deodorant and toothpaste.

“The maternal care packages containing some necessary, basic supplies could help alleviate some of the economic burden for mothers, thereby hopefully decreasing the stress process for new mothers,” Rotenbakh said.

With the aim of specializing in pediatrics, Rotenbakh hopes that this service project grows within her community and sets the table for a lifetime working to better serve people in economically or socially marginalized communities.

“It has inspired me to continue to learn and advocate for all members of our community, as well as to confront all forms of inequality and injustice in our medical system,” she said. “It has helped me find my voice as a future provider. I have also learned about the importance of prevention in medicine and hope to learn more methods as I continue in my medical education.”

Learn about seven other remarkable medical students who moved medicine in 2021.
About the Medical Student Outreach Program

The grants awarded to Oakland came from the AMA Medical Student Outreach Program, a peer-to-peer recruitment program that promotes AMA membership to first-year medical students. It also provides training and recruitment resources to encourage the incoming class of medical students to join the AMA.

For those looking to get involved, the AMA is offering a nine-month leadership opportunity for second-year medical students who exhibit excellent leadership, strong organizational skills and a desire to build their professional network.

As a Student Outreach Leader, you will lead AMA membership outreach efforts at your school as you continue to build your professional network.