

Vaccination is our best chance to end the pandemic

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Our ethical obligation as healers and health professionals to always put the health and safety of our patients first carries an awesome responsibility that also requires us to become vaccinated against COVID-19. We are not going to wish and hope our way out of a pandemic that has already claimed the lives of 800,000 of our fellow citizens. When it comes to defeating the devastating illness and death associated with this virus, we have only one weapon: widespread vaccination.

That is why I am particularly troubled by recent reports that some of our nation's largest health care organizations, including multistate hospital systems, will no longer require their employees to become vaccinated against COVID-19 until court challenges to the federal vaccine mandate are resolved. The mandate, put forth in early November as an emergency regulation by the Biden administration, specified that all eligible staff members at health care facilities participating in the Medicare and Medicaid programs must be fully vaccinated by Jan. 4, 2022.

Why AMA backs vaccine requirements

The AMA supports vaccine mandates for all private- and public-sector employees. Until a significant percentage of our population is vaccinated against COVID-19, we may well be dealing with pandemic-related sickness and death for many more months or even years to come. In an AMA-led amicus brief filed Dec. 30, 15 other leading medical organizations joined us in urging our nation's highest court to preserve the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's emergency temporary standard for COVID-19 vaccination for large businesses. Mandates like this one represent our best strategy to end this pandemic.

The fact remains that the safe and highly effective COVID-19 vaccines widely available throughout the country offer our best opportunity to put this pandemic nightmare behind us. Physicians and other health professionals were among the first to receive COVID-19

vaccinations when they became available a year ago, and the more than 96% vaccination rate among our physician workforce speaks volumes about the vaccines' safety and efficacy.

Health professionals have an ethical duty to put patients' health and well-being first. Universal vaccination is necessary to protect health care professionals and their families, but also the patients who seek their care. In many cases, health care employers have required staff members to receive vaccinations for influenza, hepatitis B and pertussis for many years now, which reinforces the feasibility of COVID-19 vaccination. It's also important to note that numerous hospital systems and other large employers were requiring workers to receive COVID-19 vaccination before the federal mandate was issued.

The AMA has been calling upon all health care and long-term care employers to require COVID-19 vaccination of all eligible employees since July—and we practice what we preach by requiring the same thing of those who work for us. At the same time, we recognize that some workers cannot become vaccinated for medical reasons and should be granted exemptions.

Dealing with a new threat

New modeling by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates that the Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2 is spreading rapidly across the U.S., compounding the immense pressures placed on health care systems by the Delta variant. Clearly this is not the time to relax vaccination requirements for health care workers, when instead we should be encouraging all eligible people to receive boosters. Concerns that vaccine mandates might create or aggravate labor shortages in the health care workforce pale in comparison to the potential that Omicron poses to health care systems across our country.

Our *AMA Code of Medical Ethics* calls on health workers to get vaccinated to protect themselves, their families and friends—and most importantly, to protect the health and well-being of those who turn to them for care.