Patients deserve greater clarity on who is a physician—and who isn’t

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It’s increasingly common for patients to encounter nonphysician practitioners as members of their health care teams. Meanwhile, ever more nonphysician practitioners have received advanced training resulting in a doctorate degree, such as the doctor of nursing practice.

To help patients keep pace with these changes, physicians should make new strides to clarify their roles and credentials vis-a-vis other members of the health care team and also promote collaboration among all health professionals, according to an AMA Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs report that was adopted at the 2022 AMA Interim Meeting.

The core issue is that “the skill sets and experience of nonphysician practitioners are not the same as those of physicians.” Thus, when nonphysician practitioners identify themselves as “doctors”—consistent with the doctoral-level degrees they earned—“it may create confusion and be misleading to patients and other practitioners,” says the report.

In fact, surveys (PDF) performed as part of the AMA Truth in Advertising Campaign have found that while patients strongly support physician-led health care teams, many are confused about the level of education and training of health professionals—and the confusion isn’t limited to nonphysician practitioners who hold doctorates. For example, roughly one-fifth of respondents think psychiatrists are not physicians, while a similar number think nurse practitioners are physicians.

The AMA Code of Medical Ethics touches on this issue in an opinion on collaborative care, which provides guidance on the roles of physicians in team-based settings where a mix of health professionals provide care.

Communicate about the team

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To help ensure patients get the best care and understand who is caring for them, the AMA House of Delegates amended that opinion to provide advice about transparency in the context of team-based care involving nonphysician practitioners.

“Health care teams often include members of multiple health professions, including physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, pharmacists, physical therapists and care managers among others,” the amended opinion says. “To foster the trust essential to healing relationships between patients and physicians or nonphysician practitioners, all members of the team should be candid about their professional credentials, their experience and the role they will play in the patient’s care.”

In addition, as clinical leaders within health care teams, individual physicians should “communicate appropriately with the patient and family, respecting the unique relationship of patient and family as members of the team,” as well as “assure that all team members are describing their profession and role.

At the same time, as leaders within health care institutions, physicians individually and collectively should “promote a culture of respect, collegiality and transparency among all health care personnel.”

Read about the other highlights from the 2022 AMA Interim Meeting.

Patients deserve care led by physicians—the most highly educated, trained and skilled health care professionals. Learn how, as part of the AMA Recovery Plan for America’s Physicians, the AMA is fighting inappropriate scope-of-practice expansions that threaten patient safety.