



August 25, 2020

Stephanie Loucka, Executive Director
c/o Jill Reardon, Director of External Affairs
State Medical Board of Ohio
30 E. Broad Street, 3rd Floor
Columbus, Ohio 43215
[Via Email – Stephanie.loucka@med.ohio.gov]

Dear Director Loucka,

The undersigned members of the Medical Association Coalition (MAC) appreciate the opportunity to provide a communication to the State Medical Board of Ohio (SMBO) on concerns that the COVID-19 pandemic impact is having on the mental and emotional well-being of physicians and other healthcare professionals in Ohio.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 50 percent of physicians treating patients reported that they had experienced symptoms of burnout, “a syndrome characterized by high emotional exhaustion, high depersonalization, and a low sense of personal accomplishment from work.”ⁱ Many physicians are reluctant to seek help for burnout or any of its many underlying causes for fear that they will be perceived as weak or unfit to practice medicine by their colleagues or employers, or because they assume that seeking such care may have a detrimental effect on their ability to renew or retain their state medical license, arguably the most important credential a physician receives during their professional career.

In addition to already high rates of burnout, there are elevated rates of mental health disorders among the medical community. According to studies published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, approximately 29 percent of resident physician’s experience depression or depressive symptoms over the course of their training. The Academic Psychiatry’s DEPRESS study indicated that of the Ohio medical residents that were at least moderately depressed, over 31 percent had thoughts of suicide, and over 72 percent were not receiving treatment. Multiple studies and journals report that physicians, especially women, have a higher risk of suicide than the general population.

The stigma attached to asking for support can lead doctors to suffer in silence, use negative coping mechanisms, like alcohol or drugs to self-medicate, or to ultimately decide to take their own lives.

The COVID-19 pandemic only compounds the concerns of depression, burnout, and suicide among the medical profession. Physicians and other healthcare professionals are now risking their lives, threatened not only by exposure to the virus but also by pervasive and harmful effects on their mental health. In a recent survey of healthcare workers at a New York Hospital during the height of the coronavirus surge, 57 percent reported acute stress, 48 percent reported symptoms of depression,

and 33 percent reported symptoms of anxiety.ⁱⁱ Tragically, there are already reports of clinicians dying by suicide amid the pandemic, including the highly publicized death of a prominent emergency medicine physician in Manhattan.

Now more than ever, the MAC encourages swift action to promote the health, well-being, and resilience of Ohio's healthcare professionals to ensure recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic as well as its damaging impact on the medical community. The MAC believes that a multi-faceted approach is necessary to improve the environment for Ohio's healthcare professionals, creating a culture that is supportive of seeking mental health treatment, without stigma or repercussion.

The MAC encourages the SMBO to review the current initial and renewal applications with hopes that the applications will be further aligned with the recommendations made by the Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB) Policy on Wellness and Burnout. Among other criteria, the FSMB recommends considering language such as, "are you *currently* suffering from any condition for which you are not being appropriately treated that impairs your judgment or that would otherwise adversely affect your ability to practice medicine in a competent, ethical and professional manner." Additionally, we encourage the SMBO to review whether these applications ensure that appropriate differentiation is made between the illness with which a physician has been diagnosed and the impairments that may result.

The MAC encourages the SMBO to also consider exploring changes that would limit the personal health information of licensees related to an illness or diagnosis that is disclosed publicly as part of a SMBO's disciplinary process. As recommended by the FSMB, information disclosed should relate only to impairment of professional abilities, medical malpractice, and professional misconduct.

Lastly, the MAC encourages the SMBO to consider establishing a new confidential non-disciplinary program, or amending the existing program established through Ohio Administrative Code 4731-28, to allow for the confidential treatment and monitoring of mental health disorders and other conditions impacting a practitioner's health and well-being. We believe that it is important that this be established and managed by an external organization with appropriate clinical expertise and training. The One-Bite Program provides excellent guidance on the creation of such a program that would encourage early intervention, ensure confidentiality, and promote physicians and other healthcare professionals to seek help for mental health disorders. The MAC encourages the SMBO to consider an expanded partnership with the Ohio Physicians Health Program to establish such a confidential program.

When it comes to mental health, we know that physicians often do not seek out the kind of care they recommend to their patients, whether out of shame, fear of being stigmatized or silent acceptance to the unwritten stoic norms of the profession. The existing burnout epidemic and high rates of existing mental health disorders, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, is causing extraordinary stresses on healthcare professionals. It is clear how vital it is to establish a culture that encourages healthcare professionals to seek help for their mental health.

The MAC members thank you for reviewing this matter and stand ready to partner with the SMBO to address this issue urgently. The future of Ohio's healthcare professionals is dependent on the actions we take today. Jennifer Hayhurst, the Ohio State Medical Association's Director of Regulatory Affairs, has agreed to act as the contact and coordinator for our group. Ms. Hayhurst can be reached at jhayhurst@osma.org or (614) 527-6766.

Sincerely,



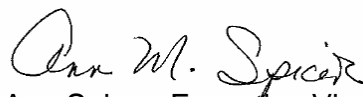
Todd Baker, Chief Executive Officer
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Matt Harney, MBA, Executive Director
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Terry Russell, Executive Director
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ⁱ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2019. *Taking Action Against Clinician Burnout: A Systems Approach to Professional Well-Being*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

ⁱⁱ Psychological distress, coping behaviors, and preferences for support among New York healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Gen Hospital Psychiatry*. 2020 September-October; 66: 1-8. Published online 2020 Jun 16.