

APA Official Actions

Position Statement on Physician Health Programs in the Evaluation, Treatment, and Monitoring of Mental Health Conditions, including Substance Use Disorders in Physicians

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“Policy documents are approved by the APA Assembly and Board of Trustees. ... These are ... position statements that define APA official policy on specific subjects.” – *APA Operations Manual*

Issue:

Data suggests that 10%-12% of physicians develop a substance use disorder (SUD) over their lifetime, and even more develop other mental health conditions that can adversely impact performance. Physicians may be at increased risk for certain SUDs and likely have equal if not greater risk of mental health conditions, especially those that may be caused or exacerbated by stress. Physicians with mental health conditions and SUDs may pose unique concerns to the public by virtue of their safety-sensitive position as clinicians. Unfortunately, compared with the general public, physicians with mental health conditions and SUDs tend to enter treatment later in the course of their illness, and they may go to great lengths to conceal their illness on account of fear related to possible negative professional consequences for seeking treatment.

Encouragingly, data also suggests that relative to nonphysicians, physicians may have higher rates of illness remission once engaged in formal SUD treatment programming and post-treatment health support and monitoring (75%-85% long-term remission rates). For many physicians, the entry point into SUD treatment is a state-specific physician health program (PHP). PHPs are designed to help identify, refer to treatment, and guide the monitoring and illness remission of physicians with mental health conditions and SUDs. PHPs are often governed by state laws and administered by collaborations between state medical societies, professional liability carriers, and/or state medical boards. Notably, significant differences still exist between individual state PHPs in terms of referral processes, treatments offered, costs to physicians, second opinion processes, licensing board mandates, and ongoing monitoring requirements.

It is the position of APA that:

- 1. Physicians with mental health conditions and substance use disorders (SUDs) must have access to evidence-based evaluations, treatment, and monitoring for clinicians in a non-disciplinary, nondiscriminatory, peer-based therapeutic program environment.**

- 2. Research into antecedents and prevention of, and the unique treatment needs of, physicians with mental health conditions and SUDs is needed, including developing mechanisms to cover the cost of the specialized evaluation and treatment that are necessary to credibly verify a physician's safety to practice.**

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