

Physician-led health care teams

The problem

This country faces a growing healthcare workforce problem. We are experiencing shortages of both physicians and nurses, while at the same time, there is increasing demand for primary care. There are solutions for addressing these workforce shortages and primary care needs, including loan forgiveness programs, increasing the number of residency slots and taking steps to improve reimbursement for primary care services. While these solutions are longer term, there are also steps that can be taken in the short term.

Some have argued that nurse practitioners (NPs) – one type of APRN – should be granted authority to practice independently from physicians as a means to address primary care needs. These arguments come at a time when health care delivery and payment models are heading in the opposite direction. New models of care delivery, including Accountable Care Organizations and Patient-Centered Medical Homes, require integration and teamwork among providers to improve health care outcomes and reduce health care costs. A growing number of policy experts recommend these team-based approaches over solo and independent practice by physicians, nurses and other providers. These two approaches – independent practice and team-based care – take health policy in two very different directions. One approach would further compartmentalize and fragment health care delivery; the other would foster integration and coordination.

The solution

The AMA supports the use of patient-centered, team-based patient care. The AMA believes that increased use of physician-led teams of multidisciplinary health care professionals can have a positive impact on our country's primary care needs. A team-based approach would include physicians and other health professionals working together, sharing decisions and information, for the benefit of the patient. Physicians, NPs, physician assistants, nurses and other professionals would work together, drawing on the specific strengths of each member.

Health care teams require leadership, just as teams do in business, government, sports and schools. Physicians bring to the team the highest level of training and preparation and as such are the best suited to guide the other members of the team. Health care professionals such as nurse practitioners (NPs) are indispensable, but they cannot take the place of a fully trained physician. Physicians are trained to provide complex differential diagnoses, develop a treatment plan that addresses multiple organ systems and order and interpret tests within the context of a patient's overall health condition. The training and education of NPs is appropriate for dealing with patients who need basic, preventative care or treatment of straightforward acute illnesses and previously diagnosed, uncomplicated chronic conditions. NPs and physicians have skills, knowledge and abilities that are not equivalent, but instead are complementary. The most effective way to maximize the talents of the complementary skill sets of both professionals is to work as a team.

We have an opportunity to make a serious dent in the primary care shortage by being more efficient about how primary care is delivered. In short, this country needs more doctors and it needs more nurses, and it needs them working together in teams.