

STS Headquarters
633 N Saint Clair St, Suite 2100
Chicago, IL 60611-3658
(312) 202-5800
sts@sts.org



Washington Office
20 F St NW, Suite 310 C
Washington, DC 20001-6702
advocacy@sts.org

March 18, 2024

Dr. Humayun Chaudhry, DO, MACP
President
Federation of State Medical Boards
1775 Eye Street NW
Suite 410
Washington, DC 20006

RE: Supporting Physician Wellness

Dear Dr. Chaudhry,

On behalf of The Society of Thoracic Surgeons (STS), I would like to thank the Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB) for your work in prioritizing and advocating for physician well-being.

Founded in 1964, STS is a not-for-profit organization representing more than 7,700 surgeons, researchers, and allied healthcare professionals worldwide who are dedicated to ensuring the best possible outcomes for surgeries of the heart, lungs, and esophagus, as well as other surgical procedures within the chest.

The dedication of the FSMB to improving physician well-being is important to our membership because cardiothoracic surgeons are at significant risk of burnout. Results from the 2019 STS Practice Survey revealed that more than half of surgeon members in the United States reported experiencing symptoms of burnout.¹ This could be caused by a number of contributing factors such as long work hours, poor work-life balance, and the growing complexity of the healthcare system that impact many specialties.²

This strain can impact a surgeon's sense of professional satisfaction and can lead to patient safety issues. A study published in the Journal of the American College of Surgeons found a correlation between burnout and medical errors made by surgeons. Surgeons who reported committing medical errors prior to the survey had significantly higher mean scores of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and significantly lower personal accomplishment scores compared to those who did not report medical errors.³

For these reasons, STS is encouraged by the FSMB's continued advocacy for state reforms that provide "safe haven" reporting systems and wellness programs for physicians. These programs are essential to providing confidential and supportive care for physicians experiencing burnout, stress, and mental health issues. This is especially important in helping change attitudes in states with licensing boards that use stigmatizing language that discourages physicians from

¹ STS Thoracic Surgery Practice and Access Task Force - 2019 Workforce Report.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7483689/>

² Curr Trauma Rep. 2023; 9(2): 28–39. Published online 2023 Jan 17. doi: 10.1007/s40719-022-00249-x

PMCID: PMC9843106 PMID: 36688090

³ Burnout and Medical Errors Among American Surgeons.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4884544/>

seeking help.⁴ Confidentiality protections allow physicians to seek help early, with confidence their personal health information will remain private.

The STS recognizes the role that medical associations can play in the advancement of physician wellness. We believe collaboration amongst all healthcare stakeholders is necessary to advance common goals.

The STS supports the following actions to support physician wellness, as outlined by the American Medical Association⁵:

- Ensure each state’s licensing, credentialing, and other applications focus on “current impairment” rather than stigmatizing language that inappropriately asks about past diagnoses.
- Enact state legislation that provides for “safe haven” type reporting systems and wellness programs for physicians, medical students, and other healthcare professionals to seek care for burnout and other stressors, as well as mental health issues.
- Partner with healthcare professional organizations to seek changes across all healthcare professional licensing boards.
- Engage professional liability insurance carriers to seek changes to applications and remove intrusive questions about past mental health and substance use that do not accurately reflect an applicant’s current ability to practice medicine safely and competently.
- Ensure that each state’s Physician Health Program laws and policies provide strong confidentiality protections for physicians seeking care or being referred for care.
- Create a process to audit, revise, and communicate medical board and licensing changes and actions to support physicians and other healthcare professionals’ health and wellness.
- Provide ongoing education to physicians and other healthcare providers to ensure they know about confidential programs, changes to licensure questions, and other efforts that support seeking and receiving care without fear of disclosure.
- Providing aid through Physician Health Programs to qualified healthcare practitioners with a substance use, mental health, or physical diagnosis, that may alter their ability to practice their profession safely.

We are committed to advocating for these actions and to lending our support to the FSMB where appropriate to help further physician wellness programs. Thank you again for your leadership in creating an environment that promotes physician health and well-being. We look forward to aligning our efforts on this issue. Please contact Iain Adams, Government Relations Coordinator, at iadams@sts.org, or Derek Brandt, Vice President of Government Affairs, at dbrandt@sts.org, should you need additional information or clarification.

Sincerely,



Jennifer C. Romano, MD
President

⁴ Consistency Between State Medical License Applications and Recommendations Regarding Physician Mental Health. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2780002>

⁵ ARC Issue Brief: Confidential care to support physician health and wellness. <https://www.ama-assn.org/system/files/issue-brief-physician-health-wellness.pdf>