



I-6

## MEDICAL SOCIETY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK EXECUTIVE HEADQUARTERS

April 15, 2020

**Arthur C. Fougner, MD**  
**President**

**Bonnie L. Litvack, MD**  
**President-Elect**

**Joseph R. Sellers, MD**  
**Vice-President**

**Thomas J. Madejski, MD**  
**Immediate Past President**

**Frank G. Dowling, MD**  
**Secretary**

**Sana L. Bloch, MD**  
**Assistant Secretary**

**Mark J. Adams**  
**Treasurer**

**Parag H. Mehta, MD**  
**Assistant Treasurer**

**William R. Latreille, Jr., MD**  
**Speaker**

**Maria A. Basile, MD**  
**Vice-Speaker**

**Sam L. Unterricht, MD**  
**Chair, BOT**

**Philip A. Schuh, CPA, MS**  
**Executive Vice President**

**Senior Vice-President:**  
**Morris M. Auster, Esq.**  
**Legislative & Regulatory Affairs**  
**Chief Legislative Counsel**

**Vice-Presidents:**  
**Terrance Bedient**  
**Committee for Physicians' Health**

**Patricia Clancy**  
**Public Health and Education**

**Laurel Mayer**  
**Meetings and Conventions**

**Regina McNally**  
**Socio-Medical Economics**

**Eunice Skelly**  
**Membership Services**

**Christina Southard**  
**Communications**

Commissioner Howard Zucker, MD  
New York State Department of Health  
Corning Tower, 14<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Empire State Plaza  
Albany, New York 12203

Dear Commissioner Zucker:

On behalf of the Medical Society of the State of New York, we would like to thank you and Governor Andrew Cuomo for truly extraordinary leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic has enormous consequences, not only for the public, but for those working in the health care arena. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it is, and will be, not uncommon for everyone to experience increased levels of distress and anxiety, particularly in an environment of social isolation. However, physicians and other frontline health care professionals are particularly vulnerable to negative mental health consequences as they strive to balance the duty of caring for patients under extraordinary circumstances with concerns about their own well-being and that of their own family and friends.

Our colleagues are under immense pressure given the volume and intensity of care they render, the personal risk of infection, equipment shortages, and the moral injury relating to the triage of patients and resources in a manner inconceivable just a few weeks before. Too many of these patients do not survive. Due to public health restrictions, many die alone (except for their health care team).

Like combat soldiers, physicians are immersed in a setting of stressors which in many will lead to symptoms of depression/stress disorder including prolonged sadness, difficulty sleeping, intrusive memories and/or feelings of hopelessness. A trusted mental health advisor explains that 'in 9-11 the buildings came down in 14 minutes – in COVID it's going to be months, and further, every responder is a victim.'

You are correct to praise physicians for their heroic efforts, but it is also imperative to support them going forward through a peer to peer program, similar to programs that have been established for military veterans. Talking to a trusted colleague can alleviate some of the difficulties at a critical time in the public health crisis. MSSNY believes that a peer to peer counseling program for these physicians is now absolutely essential. Respectfully, we seek your assistance and approval to enable such a program which will aid New York's physicians, many of whom have selflessly provided needed patient care in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For such a program to go forward, we need certain barriers to be lifted. Just like similar programs constructed for the members of the police and fire departments after 9/11 and similar to what is already in place for attorneys in New York State, the Medical Society of the State of New York requests that you waive the statutory requirement for physicians to report suspected misconduct that otherwise would be required under the public health law. While we very much appreciate the efforts to enact liability protection language for physicians providing care to Covid-19 patients, these protections would likely not extend to physicians providing peer counseling for disclosures made regarding conduct that under ordinary circumstances might have been interpreted to be alleged misconduct. If physicians perceive that what they reveal may ultimately be divulged elsewhere, they simply will avoid this much needed counseling. Protecting the confidentiality of these counseling sessions is thus essential.



MSSNY's goal of a peer to peer program is to promote wellness through peer outreach among medical students and physicians and to provide that peer with resources to understand their primary and secondary stressors. Timely and appropriate referral when needed will be integral to the program—with the understanding that seeking professional help if symptoms persist or worsen over time is essential. The Medical Society's peer objectives include ensuring that a peer is someone who is a trained listener and that peer support may address: stressors related to COVID-19; adverse event or death of patient, family member; family issues such as illnesses, divorce; stressors within the practice, institutions or employment; stressors related between the employer and professional ethics; financial issues, physician illness/injury; colleague difficulties; substance use and school difficulties. The training program will be provided by entities experienced in peer programs. An assessment of psychological first aid will be an important component of this training. MSSNY has a cadre of physicians and medical students who are eager to serve as peer counselors and we will begin that training within the month.

Peers, because they have undergone and survived relevant experiences, are credible supports for others. Interactions with peers who are successfully coping with similar situations are more likely to result in the development of resilience. Peers tend to be more comfortable interacting with colleagues who share common characteristics and experiences in order to establish a sense of normalcy and optimism.

The Medical Society of the State of New York, under the Committee on Physician Wellness and Resiliency, will identify and train physician members who are interested in meeting, sharing, and participating in collegial peer support for colleagues. Peer-support coordinators will be trained to refer colleagues for appropriate care or contact emergency medical services as necessary. MSSNY will recruit physician and medical student volunteers who are interested in receiving training from its educational programs and will be representative of geographic areas throughout the state. The peer supporters will be a diverse group, culled from the major practice specialties and from among those who have demonstrated leadership potential. As a professional association, MSSNY is not authorized to provide medical care, treatment, or crisis intervention services. Peer-support coordinators will be trained to refer colleagues for appropriate care or to contact emergency medical services as necessary.

This program will allow the peer to address and acknowledge the constant fear, worry and stressors about patients and family members during and following the COVID-19 outbreak. Without such a program, we are concerned about the long-term consequences for our colleagues and the very real possibility that physicians and medical students will leave the profession completely.

In conjunction with the American Medical Association, MSSNY has launched this past week, a COVID 19 Monitoring Survey and Pulse Survey to our member institutions. MSSNY will be receiving aggregate data on the stress levels of physicians and other clinical staff within the institutions which we will share with you. The Medical Society of the State of New York knows that you are very interested in the issues surrounding physician wellness—and that prior to this event—you had planned a roundtable on this topic.

The time is now for us to best aid those on the front lines during this crisis, our colleagues. We must not turn our backs on them. We look forward to your positive support for the MSSNY Physician Peer to Peer Program.

Sincerely,



Art Fougner, MD



Bonnie Litvack, MD



Charles Rothberg, MD

CC: Governor Andrew Cuomo  
Megan Baldwin, Sr. Health Advisor,  
Sally Dreslin, MS, RN Executive Deputy Commissioner, NYS Department of Health  
Paula Breen, Director, OPMC, NYS DOH  
Marcus Friedrich, MD, Chief Medical Officer, NYS DOH