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April 13, 2020

The Honorable Elinore F. McCance-Katz, MD, PhD
Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857

Dear Assistant Secretary McCance-Katz:

On behalf of the American Medical Association (AMA) and our physician and medical student members, I am writing to urge the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to provide increased flexibility for physicians in Opioid Treatment Programs (OTP) to provide essential medications to their patients during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Specifically, I am writing to ask that you allow OTPs to satisfy the in-person evaluation requirement for treatment of opioid use disorder (OUD) by using telemedicine.

The AMA appreciates that SAMHSA has taken many positive steps to help patients with OUD during these unprecedented times. We are greatly concerned, however, by reports in the physician and treatment community that many patients in OTPs are still required to leave their homes and to come in contact with the public, other patients, and health professionals as a result of the in-person evaluation requirement. We also are aware that more than 300 addiction medicine physicians from across the country have expressed similar concerns, and the AMA strongly supports their efforts and expertise on how to best treat patients with OUD. When so many physicians on the front lines make a recommendation to allow their patients to stay at home and follow the guidelines from the White House Coronavirus Task Force, it is essential that policymakers quickly take the actions necessary to put those recommendations into practice.

The AMA urges SAMHSA immediately to allow the evaluation of patients to be conducted via telemedicine if a program physician, primary care physician, or an authorized health care professional under the supervision of a program physician, determines that an adequate evaluation of the patient can be accomplished via telemedicine.

We understand the safety concerns regarding treatment of OUD patients with methadone. We believe that physician oversight and discretion will mitigate those concerns.

If you have any questions, please contact Margaret Garikes, Vice President of Federal Affairs, at Margaret.Garikes@ama-assn.org or 202-789-7409.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James L. Madara". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "James" and last name "Madara" clearly legible.

James L. Madara, MD