

January 22, 2020

The Honorable Sara Howard
Chair
Health and Human Services Committee
Nebraska Legislature
Room 1510
State Capitol
Lincoln, NE 68509

Re: Legislative Bill 817 – **Oppose**

Dear Chairwoman Howard:

On behalf of the American Medical Association (AMA) and our physician and medical student members, I am writing to **strongly oppose Nebraska Legislative Bill (L.B.) 817**, which would grant psychologists broad prescriptive authority. While the AMA values the role that psychologists play in our nation's health care system, we do not believe that granting them prescriptive authority is the solution to improving access to mental health services in Nebraska. Rather, this proposal would risk patient safety and expose patients, including children and adolescents, to inadequate mental health care.

Physicians have 10,000 hours of comprehensive medical education and training

The education and training of psychologists is vastly different from the education and training of physicians. Physicians have more than 10,000 hours and 7-to-11 years of postgraduate clinical education and training to enable them to correctly diagnose, treat and manage patients' health care needs. In comparison, psychologists are only required to have one year of patient care experience during their training—training that is focused entirely on **non-medical** therapies.

In sharp contrast to psychology training, at each stage of a medical student's education and training, medical students learn how pharmacotherapy integrates into all branches of medicine, such as family medicine and psychiatry, including child and adolescent psychiatry. Physicians are tested on this knowledge as part of the medical licensure process, with particular emphasis on pharmacotherapy in the third and fourth part of the United States Medical Licensing Exam—a series of four examinations that physicians must take and pass in order to be licensed to practice medicine in the United States.

After graduation from medical school, psychiatric resident physicians spend four more years learning the complexities related to appropriate prescribing in multiple clinical situations and settings—gaining in-depth knowledge essential to their chosen specialty. Such medical education and training are essential to safely treat patients and prescribe psychotropic medications that are used to treat mental illness and other conditions. There is no equivalent in psychologists' education and training, even with the additional pharmacologic educational and practicum requirements included in this legislation.

Granting psychologists prescriptive authority threatens patient safety

Insufficiently trained psychologists with a prescription pad would put medically complex patients at risk. Powerful psychotropic drugs affect a patient's entire body not just their mental illness. As described above, psychologists do not have any medical training and, therefore, cannot understand the potential complex interactions of these medications on their patients. This is particularly true for children, pregnant women, seniors and anyone with chronic medical conditions. Those patients need a well-trained physician who understands the complex interactions drugs have on the human body. **It is noteworthy that according to an AMA survey, 83 percent of patients believe that only a physician should be allowed to write a prescription for complex drugs.**

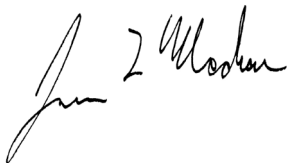
Nebraska physicians and psychologists practice in same locations

While we agree that patients need greater access to care in rural areas, the data show that Nebraska psychologists are not any better geographically situated to serve rural populations than psychiatrists and other primary care physicians in Nebraska. In the few states where psychologists have been granted prescriptive authority, psychologists continue to work in the same areas as physicians. While we encourage you to continue a dialogue on access to mental health care in Nebraska, we strongly believe granting psychologists prescriptive authority does not address these complex issues.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments. For the reasons outlined above, we urge you and the members of the Health and Human Services Committee to **oppose L.B. 817**. If you have any questions, please contact Kimberly Horvath, JD, Senior Legislative Attorney, AMA Advocacy Resource Center, at kimberly.horvath@ama-assn.org or (312) 464-4783.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James L. Madara". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and "M".

James L. Madara, MD

cc: Members of the Health and Human Services Committee
Nebraska Medical Association
American Psychiatric Association