

## **Physician Leadership on National Drug Policy**

Addiction to illegal drugs is a major national problem that creates impaired health, harmful behaviors, and major economic and social burdens. Addiction to illegal drugs is a chronic illness. Addiction treatment requires continuity of care, including acute and follow-up care strategies, management of any relapses, and satisfactory outcome measurements.

We are impressed by the growing body of evidence that enhanced medical and public health approaches are the most effective methods of reducing harmful use of illegal drugs. These approaches offer great opportunities to decrease the burden on individuals and communities, particularly when they are integrated into multidisciplinary and collaborative approaches. The current emphasis - on use of the criminal justice system and interdiction to reduce illegal drug use and the harmful effects of illegal drugs - is not adequate to address these problems.

The abuse of tobacco and alcohol is also a critically important national problem. We strongly support efforts to reduce tobacco use, including changes in the regulatory environment and tax policy. Abuse of alcohol causes a substantial burden of disease and antisocial behavior, which requires vigorous accessible treatment and prevention programs. Despite the gravity of problems caused by tobacco and alcohol, we are focusing our attention on illicit drugs because of the need for fundamental shift in policy.

### **As physicians, we believe that:**

- It is time for a new emphasis in our national drug policy by substantially refocusing our investment in the prevention and treatment of harmful drug use. This requires reallocating resources toward drug treatment and prevention, utilizing criminal justice procedures which are shown to be effective in reducing supply and demand, and reducing the disabling regulation of addiction treatment programs.
- Concerted efforts to eliminate the stigma associated with the diagnosis and treatment of drug problems are essential. Substance abuse should be accorded parity with other chronic, relapsing conditions insofar as access to care, treatment benefits, and clinical outcomes are concerned.
- Physicians and all other health professionals have a major responsibility to train themselves and their students to be clinically competent in this area.
- Community-based health partnerships are essential to solve these problems.
- New research opportunities produced by advances in the understanding of the biological and behavioral aspects of drugs and addiction, as well as research on the outcomes of prevention and treatment programs, should be exploited by expanding investments in research and training.