

## **AMWA Statement on HHS Conscience and Religious Freedom Division**

The American Medical Women's Association (AMWA) wishes to acknowledge our concern regarding the recent announcement made by the United States Department of Health & Human Services (HHS). The HHS has announced that it is opening a Division for Conscience and Religious Freedom, with the intent of more strictly enforcing current regulations and thereby expanding the scope of current practice regarding moral objections to providing care to certain individuals. This would also strengthen enforcement of regulations permitting such objections.

AMWA, an organization dedicated to empowering women in medicine to better care for all patients from the unique perspectives of female physicians, is concerned that these new measures taken by the HHS widen the potential for discrimination against patients belonging to minority groups including women, members of the LGBT community, and people of color. The vague language in the recent HHS statements is of specific concern as it appears to allow broad and ill-defined objections to care, and to allow providers to refuse even to counsel patients on all of their options regarding their health care plan.

For example, the HHS is expected to follow the current White House's precedent of restricting birth control availability based on religious objections. Birth control is in many cases considered a medical necessity, not merely a contraceptive. This could affect a patient's ability to get access to a medication that treats chronic, often debilitating conditions and, thus, may keep them out of the workforce. The Conscience and Religious Freedom Division may also restrict the ability of teenagers to get STI testing, and for women to get pap smears, including other medically sound preventive and screening procedures.

It is the opinion of AMWA that the Hippocratic Oath, which includes a promise never to discriminate against patients, should not be compromised. While physicians may have personal beliefs, information about all possible treatment options should be made available to patients. Access to appropriate healthcare is as fundamental a right as is freedom of religion and conscience. AMWA hopes that this newly created division of HHS will not allow for discrimination or diminished health care standards for specific individuals or groups.