New APA President Vows to Restore Specialty's Credibility

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ATLANTA — American psychiatry is facing a “crisis of credibility,” said Steven S. Sharfstein, M.D., the new president of the American Psychiatric Association.

Dr. Sharfstein vowed at the APA’s annual meeting to restore that credibility by advocating for patients and creating and enforcing ethical standards.

“Our profession is seen, by many, as an interest group, a trade association. And too often we have behaved like one,” said Dr. Sharfstein, who has served as president and chief executive officer of the Sheppard Pratt Health System, a non-profit psychiatric hospital system in Baltimore, since 1992.

Pushing patients to fail on drugs is failing to lead when it comes to problems such as lack of access, high costs, and unmeasured quality in health care. The problem, he said, is not a lack of sound policy proposals, but the profession’s lack of credibility.

“We speak, too frequently, like doctors. And to a large extent, we have only ourselves to blame,” said Dr. Sharfstein, who pointed to an academic and institutional system of self-discipline, an unacceptable rate of medical errors, and gross disparities in health care. As a profession, psychiatry has frequently allowed itself to be corrupted by industry and has compromised the core value of patient confidentiality in an effort to guarantee payment and stay on managed care contracts.

“We must earn back our moral authority,” said Dr. Sharfstein, who succeeds Dr. Peter Breggin, whose research interest has been in the field of psychiatry. “It is the only goal worthy of our profession. It is ‘rife with the appearance of conflict of interest,’ not with conflict of interest itself.”

Psychiatry’s relationship with drug companies is “rife with the appearance of conflict of interest and frankly, with conflict of interest itself.”

Credibility is essential to our credibility and our professionals, Dr. Sharfstein said.

Academic inquiry is another area that must be defended. That means refusing to let drug companies withhold clinically important information from physicians and patients. The APA has made progress in obtaining access to data, and the group will continue to push for federal legislation aimed at establishing a registry of all clinical trials, he noted.

Psychiatrists also need to work to protect the scientific integrity of the field from attacks, including those from government officials. Dr. Sharfstein cited comments made by Rep. Ron Paul (R-Tex.), who is opposed to psychiatric care for children. Rep. Paul, an ob.gyn., has said that psychiatric diagnosis is inherently subjective and that preshocking in schools has “no place in a free and decent society.”

Dr. Sharfstein fired back, calling Rep. Paul’s comments “ignorant attacks.”

Dr. Sharfstein warned that threats to scientific integrity have also come from government agencies. For example, Bush administration officials recently instructed researchers presenting a study on suicidal- ity among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals to not use the words gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender.

Telling researchers to delete those words is an insult to science and human rights, Dr. Sharfstein said, and psychiatrists cannot sit back and let that happen.

“If we abandon our core principles, then we lose our moral and professional authority—which is the light we must use to lead,” he said.

Dr. Sharfstein, whose research interest includes the financing for psychiatric care, will focus on issues such as psychopharmacological prescribing, malpractice, and parity during his term as APA president. But his top goal will be to have Congress treat American medical psychiatry by transforming psychiatry. “It is the only goal worthy of our profession,” he said.