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WHAT IS YOUR STATE MEDICAL BOARD DOING FOR YOU?

Tracking disciplined doctors across state lines...shutting down rogue Internet pharmacies...providing free physician profiles so consumers know who is treating them...

A new report looks at how state medical boards work to improve medical practice and protect the public as technology and other forces make health care more complex.

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Dallas – A national alert service has sharply increased the number of disciplined physicians state medical boards prevent from setting up shop undetected in a second state, according to a new report from the Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB). Since 88 percent of disciplined physicians hold licenses to practice medicine in multiple states, this collaborative effort of state medical boards represents a significant advance in public safety.

This Disciplinary Alert Service is one of the initiatives highlighted in the FSMB's *State of States: Physician Regulation 2007*, a report issued today that looks at some of the many ways state medical boards work to protect health care consumers. The full report is available online at www.fsmb.org.

“Medical boards do so much more than discipline doctors,” says James N. Thompson, M.D., president and CEO of the FSMB. “They establish standards of practice to keep the public from harm, especially as health care becomes more mobile and technology-based, and educate doctors about changes that affect the way they practice medicine. The role of medical boards has never been more important.”

Among the programs and policy developments covered in the report, the second in a series of in-depth looks at the work of state medical boards, are:

- **Alerting states as disciplined doctors cross state lines.** Quick action to identify a sanctioned physician who might cross state lines is an effective and efficient way for medical boards to protect health care consumers from the small group of physicians who pose a threat to public safety. State medical boards voluntarily share licensee data with FSMB's Physician Data Center, a data depository that contains information about almost all physicians licensed in the U.S., as well as board disciplinary actions dating back to the early 1960s. FSMB uses this information for its Disciplinary Alert Service, which notifies boards within 48 hours when one of their licensees has been disciplined in another state. The notified board can then initiate its own action.

FSMB State of the States/ Add One

Medical boards' growing use of this service has contributed to a 37 percent increase in reciprocal actions, those based on the action of another state, over the last three years. The Disciplinary Alert Service helps medical boards, which often have limited investigative and legal resources, to prioritize action against those physicians who pose the greatest potential threat to residents.

- **Cracking down on “rogue” Internet pharmacies.** The Internet is changing the practice of medicine for good and bad. Physicians are able to provide information to their patients in new and useful ways via the Internet. At the same time, unethical physicians can use the Internet to prescribe dangerous drugs through rogue online pharmacies, which dispense drugs solely on the basis of online questionnaires and without a physical examination by a physician. As a growing number of online pharmacies shift from dispensing “lifestyle” drugs to more dangerous controlled substances to unwary consumers, state medical boards remain at the forefront of an intensifying battle against this public health threat. In collaboration with federal authorities, medical boards actively investigate and discipline physicians associated with these sites, pursue legislation restricting the operation of illegal Web pharmacies, and assist in investigations and large-scale crackdowns by federal authorities on these sites.
- **Helping health care consumers make better choices.** In response to increasing calls from consumers for more transparency, many state boards have improved access to information about physician licensees and removed barriers that hinder openness. Nearly every state medical board now offers free online physician profiles to the public, including information such as licensure history, specialty board certification, educational history, malpractice information and disciplinary data. Unlike information provided by for-profit firms and health care companies, state boards gather and verify information directly from physicians.

State of the States also includes FSMB's annual *Summary of Board Actions*, a compilation of disciplinary actions initiated by its 70 member medical boards. In addition to providing disciplinary data, the report includes information about the context in which each board operates.

This year's report includes disciplinary data for each board from 2002-06. During this five-year period, the total number of actions taken by medical boards has risen from 4,875 in 2002 to 5,574 in 2006. Because states operate with different financial resources, levels of autonomy, legal constraints and staffing levels, the *Summary of Board Actions* is most useful in tracking trends in physician discipline within a state over time, not in comparing state to state.

To assist in tracking disciplinary trends, the report includes the Composite Action Index, a weighted average of disciplinary actions taken against physicians practicing in a state, as well as all physicians licensed by that state. Actions affecting physicians' licenses, such as revocations and suspensions, are weighted more heavily in a state's CAI.

More detailed information on how the CAI is calculated, along with *Summary of Board Actions* reports since 1990, is available at www.fsmb.org, under “Medical Board Disciplinary Data” in the Media Room section.

The Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB) is a national not-for-profit organization representing the 70 medical boards of the United States and its territories. FSMB's mission is to continuously improve the quality, safety and integrity of health care by developing and promoting high standards for physician licensure and practice.