



Date: February 4, 2026

To: The Honorable Chair Sen. Lisa Reynolds
The Honorable Vice-Chair Sen. Dick Anderson
Members of the Early Childhood and Behavioral Health Committee

From: Varma Penumetcha, MD
Member, Oregon Psychiatric Physicians Association

RE: SB 1526, Chatbots and Youth Mental Health

Chair Reynolds, Vice-Chair Andersen and members of the committee:

My name is Dr. Varma Penumetcha. I'm a psychiatrist and member of the Oregon Psychiatric Physicians Association Legislative Committee (OPPA). The OPPA, a district branch of the American Psychiatric Association, was established in 1966. OPPA serves as the organization for Oregon's medical doctors specializing in psychiatry who work together to ensure effective treatment for persons with mental illness, including substance use disorders, and compassion for them and their families.

OPPA supports SB 1526, which addresses the use of chatbots and youth mental health. This bill would create guardrails to protect children from harm, including notice that the AI companion is artificial, and requiring protocols for detecting suicidal ideation and connecting users to support, including hotlines.

Healthy psychological development in children is fostered by an engaging interaction with humans while growing in a supportive environment. In addition to the learning that occurs by positive feedback for socially desirable traits, corrective and evaluative feedback becomes internalized, to support resilience, problem solving and a level of maturity that prepares them for real life interactions. Additionally, when children rely on cognitive processing by an AI program or a chat bot, it creates dependence and eventual loss of cognitive skills such as logical reasoning and mental arithmetic. The long-term impact of these changes can be catastrophic.

AI programs or chat bots are designed to be sycophantic, meaning, they are programmed to reinforce the user's beliefs. Primarily, this unwavering positive reinforcement of a child's beliefs devoid of context or motive, fosters an unhealthy dependence at the cost of normative experiences of childhood. For example, a child would find hard to resist if a chat bot says it's acceptable to eat candy before bed. Probably, this could

make them selectively engage with a chat bot, as opposed to an adult who might promote habits to maintain good dental hygiene.

Since the use of social media came into prominence, there has been an alarming increase in teen suicide rate. Engaging with chat bots that reinforce the user's belief or even worse promote ways of committing suicide, is likely going to amplify the decline in teen mental health. There are already some examples of suicides associated with chatbot interactions and more investigations is needed regarding this aspect.

OPPA recommends a review of the law on a frequent basis as this is a quickly changing area of technology and knowledge.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our perspective on this bill.