

COVID-19 has brought out the best in physicians – and organized medicine

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While there remains much uncertainty about the course of this pandemic into next year, what we do know – what we have always known – is that COVID-19 has brought out the very best in our physician community and the entire health care workforce.

Time and again, in response to this ever-evolving novel virus, physicians have answered the call. This is true for the brave men and women on the front lines of our national response, and it is also true of physicians in small independent practices who may not have tested a single patient for COVID-19. But these physicians are heroes all the same, keeping our health care safety net intact in their local communities by providing invaluable care to repair an injury, treat a behavioral health disorder, or help a patient better manage a chronic disease.

While physicians have stood tall in this crisis, so too has organized medicine – nationally and in every state – delivering for our colleagues the support, resources, information, expert guidance, and the platform to give voice to their most pressing concerns, such as the financial relief to keep a struggling practice afloat or the PPE to keep themselves and their loved ones safe.

The American Medical Association has responded to COVID-19 in four important ways:

- By providing trusted, evidence-based resources and clear guidance to physicians on the front lines . . . resources which can be accessed for free on AMA's website.
- By helping physicians and practices recover from the disruption and damage of the pandemic by pushing for loans and other forms of financial assistance. . . and providing guidelines on how to safely reopen.
- By pushing at the highest levels of government to deliver necessary equipment, such as PPE, or to reduce obstacles to patient care.
- And by advocating for science-based, equitable policies on pandemic control strategies, testing and vaccine development and distribution.

AMA has also helped support physicians in private practice recover from the economic storm of COVID-19. Through our sustained advocacy efforts at the federal level:

- AMA secured billions in emergency funding to help physician practices stay viable and able to provide needed care through the CARES Act and subsequent emergency supplemental legislation.

- We secured broad telehealth expansion and improved payments at the federal and state levels to increase access to care and provide patients with a safer way to receive care.
- We created dozens of new CPT codes for COVID-19 testing, antibody testing and other measures related the pandemic.
- We urged the federal government to improve and expand testing and allow increased FDA Emergency Use Authorizations to speed the process and lead to more informed policy decisions.
- We convinced FDA and CDC to review and revise guidelines for antibody and other COVID-19 testing based on validity concerns, reflecting guidelines issued by the AMA to help ensure physicians and the public are aware of the limitations and potential uses of serological testing/antibody testing.
- We pushed private insurers to waive prior authorization requirements.
- We created dozens of resources, including through our STEPS Forward practice transformation series, to guide physician practices on safely reopening following lockdowns in the early stages of the pandemic; and
- We fought a very public battle against misinformation to build confidence in the safe and effective vaccines for COVID-19 and increase vaccine acceptance.

Fighting the war against misinformation and falsehoods will be an increasingly important job for physician leaders through organized medicine in the years to come. Sadly, as we have witnessed during this pandemic, there are far too many bad actors willing to spread half-truths and outright lies online to sow confusion or to support their agenda.

Physicians play such an important part in cutting through this nonsense because we know from research and from experience how much our patients trust us. Even those who may distrust large hospital systems, public health institutions or the government in general still tend to trust their personal physicians. That gives us the opportunity, and the responsibility, to be sources for credible health information rooted in science and evidence.

Anticipating the fight to come over misinformation and COVID-19 vaccines, the AMA's House of Delegates adopted policy at our Fall 2020 Special Meeting that called upon us to develop a public education campaign to combat internet falsehoods and half-truths. This led the AMA to become a founding partner in a COVID-19 Vaccine Education campaign developed by the Ad Council. It also directed us to form a coalition with like-minded health care and public health organizations to promote the facts and encourage acceptance of COVID-19 vaccines.

As long as this pandemic is part of our lives, we must continue to do everything within our power to ensure our patients and those around us are armed with factual, unbiased information so they can make the best decisions about their health.

This is the role physicians have played throughout this pandemic, and this is the role we will continue to play far into the future. Through the power and reach of organized medicine, we have the platform to go beyond our patient community and become recognized advocates for science and evidence in a time of great division. Our collective response to COVID-19 tells me we are more than ready for this challenge.

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