AI in health care, ending physician burnout & more with AMA's new president Jesse Ehrenfeld, MD, MPH

AMA Update covers a range of health care topics affecting the lives of physicians, residents, medical students and patients. From private practice and health system leaders to scientists and public health officials, hear from the experts in medicine on COVID-19, medical education, advocacy issues, burnout, vaccines and more.

Featured topic and speakers

In today’s AMA Update, the AMA’s new president, Jesse Ehrenfeld, MD, MPH, discusses the current state of medicine, his priorities for the next year, as well as the challenges and opportunities ahead for the AMA and America’s physicians. AMA Chief Experience Officer Todd Unger hosts.

Speaker

- Jesse Ehrenfeld, MD, MPH, president, AMA

Transcript

Unger: Hello and welcome to the AMA Update video and podcast series. We have a special episode today. We get to talk with the new president of the AMA, Dr. Jesse Ehrenfeld, a practicing anesthesiologist in Milwaukee. And he’s here to discuss his priorities as president and the biggest challenges in medicine over the next year.

I’m Todd Unger, AMA’s chief experience officer in Chicago. Dr. Ehrenfeld, welcome and congratulations on your new presidency of the AMA.

Dr. Ehrenfeld: Thanks, Todd. I’m so honored to have come into this role during what’s obviously a really tough time for our nation’s health care system.
Unger: Let's talk a little bit more about that. A lot of challenges to physicians and patient care right now, but also a lot of progress and possibilities. Just for starters, why are you excited to become AMA's president at this moment in time?

Dr. Ehrenfeld: Well, we certainly have a lot of challenges in health care today. But despite the fact that our health care system is in crisis, and so many of my physician colleagues are just at their breaking point, I'm optimistic. I'm optimistic about the future, about what lies ahead, about where I know I can help lead America's physicians and the AMA.

We can get this right. We can work to heal our nation. But this is only going to happen if we let physicians practice medicine—medicine that's driven by science, by our understanding of the human body, of health and disease, by restoring trust in the health care system and allowing patients to decide with their doctor what's in their best interests. And we're only going to get there with the leadership of the AMA.

Unger: Absolutely. And one of the key efforts over this past year with the AMA has been called the Recovery Plan for America's Physicians, which addresses five key areas that are very, very important to physicians, including Medicare payment reform, prior auths, scope of practice and physician burnout. How does the AMA maintain its momentum in the coming year?

Dr. Ehrenfeld: Well, during my term as AMA President, leading our Recovery Plan for America's Physicians is going to be among my top priorities. We launched that effort last year because we know—I know firsthand that physicians have just put everything into our nation's response to COVID. And now it's time for the nation to renew our commitment to physicians and sure up our health care system.

So I'm going to continue to help the AMA lead the charge to prioritize that effort, as you mentioned, reforming Medicare payments to physicians, improving telehealth, reducing stigma around mental health care and burnout. And I'm also going to push on changes that will improve the health of everyone in the U.S., particularly those who have been historically marginalized.

As you know, issues of LGBTQ health and health equity are close to my heart and have been a focus of my work in medicine and will certainly be an important part of my work in the year ahead. We've had some real success in the past few months. We're making progress on federal action around insurance company denials.

We've seen the ability to maintain funding—important funding for the Veterans Health system, the Indian Health Service. A huge win with the Lorna Breen Health Care Heroes Act and some modest expansion in GME funding at the federal level. So we're going to build on that momentum with our recovery plan, and I look forward to leading that charge.
Unger: Now, just to pick up on something you mentioned in that last response, in addition to the immense challenges, we are, as a country, facing political and cultural divide that fuels a lot of legal intrusions into the physician's practice. And as the AMA's first openly gay president, do you feel like you bring a unique perspective to these conversations?

Dr. Ehrenfeld: I certainly do. As president of the AMA, of course, my priorities are those of the organization. But every leader is able to have an impact on those priorities based on his or her unique set of experiences.

And I got to tell you, as one of the youngest to hold the office of AMA president, as the first LGBTQ person to hold the office of AMA president, and even as the first AMA president to have a child while in office, my experiences in medicine, my passion to be a champion for health equity and a champion for the development of technologies that work for all patients, not just some, all of that certainly deeply influences my perspectives and work in representing physicians across America.

I know that somebody out there watching this segment is probably struggling because of their identity, because they've been picked on. And I can only hope that the visibility that I bring through my leadership to the AMA, which, as you know, is the nation's oldest, most influential physician group, can give that person who is struggling some hope and some sense of possibility. At the end of the day, I just want to make sure that all patients can get the health care that they need.

Unger: Now, this environment that we're in right now has made it a real challenge to amplify physician voices. How do you navigate an environment like that and achieve that goal of keeping the focus on that patient/physician relationship and following the science?

Dr. Ehrenfeld: Well, as you know, we're a 176-year-old organization with a long history of bringing forward democratically-decided policy that is in our patient's best interest. And if you go back to our founding, in 1847, when we created the Code of Medical Ethics that were the steward of that really drives all of the values that guide medical practice, the real power of the AMA is bringing together the house of medicine, the 190 states and specialties, to share with one voice our perspectives on what America needs to keep health care where it needs to go.

And I am so optimistic about what the AMA is going to do to make sure that we maintain our ability to cut through the noise, to cut through the politics and to ensure that Americans get what they need when it comes to health care.

Unger: Now, one of the big parts of the changing landscape, of course, is technology. And you've got a long history and passion about digital health. And we can't talk about digital health these days without talking about AI. What critical steps do you feel must happen over the next year to help ensure that AI is used in a safe and unbiased way in medicine? And what role does the AMA play in that?
Dr. Ehrenfeld: Well, as everybody knows, digital technologies, whether it's a wearable or an AI-enabled device, offer almost limitless potential to transform health care, not only in how we practice but how our patients experience it. But without the direct input, the guidance from physicians at the earliest stages of conception and design, far too many of these technologies are going to fail to deliver.

So we're focused on helping physicians harness the power of AI in some very specific tangible ways, giving them a voice in the design and the development of these new AI-enabled technologies, providing AI training, resources and support, looking at AI trends and analysis, the regulatory framework and what's happening in the marketplace. So if folks are interested in that, we have a microsite on the AMA webpage and I encourage people to check it out.

Unger: Dr. Ehrenfeld, kind of going back to the start, your optimism, your energy are really coming through despite the challenges that physicians face. And those challenges have translated into some tough times where we see highest levels of burnout. You've got one out of five physicians considering leaving medicine altogether. How do we move forward and what words of encouragement do you have for America's physicians?

Dr. Ehrenfeld: I hear every day how exhausting it is to practice medicine in America today. But in spite of that, people roll up their sleeves, they put on their scrubs, they don their white coats every day, because they know that what they do matters. And what I would say is that no matter what challenges lie ahead for physicians in America, the AMA is here to stand beside them and make sure that we are always your powerful ally in patient care.

Unger: Dr. Ehrenfeld, we are so excited to see what the future holds and to have you as our new president. And we'll be talking with you many times over the coming year. So thanks for kicking off your year with us. That's it for today's AMA Update. We'll be back soon with another segment. In the meantime, you can find all our videos and podcasts at ama-assn.org/podcasts. Thanks for joining us today. Please take care.

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