The persistence of anti-science aggression remains a disheartening reality that appears to be worsening even as the COVID-19 public health emergency has come to an end. Peter Hotez, MD, PhD—co-inventor of the patent-free, low-cost COVID-19 vaccine technology that led to Corbevax in India and IndoVac in Indonesia—has been at the forefront of this battle for two decades, tirelessly defending the safety of vaccines on TV and social media against an onslaught of skepticism and hostility.

He first got involved in combating anti-vaccine activism because of his daughter with autism and intellectual disabilities, eventually writing the book, Vaccines Did Not Cause Rachel’s Autism. It gave him a front row seat to the anti-vaccine movement.

Most recently, longtime conspiracy theorist Joe Rogan offered to donate $100,000 to the charity of Dr. Hotez’s choice in exchange for debating Democratic presidential contender and anti-vaccine activist Robert F. Kennedy Jr. on an episode of Rogan’s podcast.

This proposition soon escalated into a torrent of controversy as the amount quickly soared to $2 million due to a Twitter pile-on from Elon Musk, Roger Stone and others. The aftermath of this incident brought forth a barrage of online harassment, death threats and even instances of physical stalking, leaving Dr. Hotez to endure an unnerving period of personal turmoil.

Here is what Dr. Hotez said physicians and health care leaders should keep in mind when it comes to addressing anti-science aggression.

**Recognize the “new normal”**
“The problem is, when that type of attack is launched … when they lob grenades, they know the hordes will follow,” Dr. Hotez said during an episode of “AMA Update.”

Dr. Hotez—dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine, and professor of pediatrics and molecular virology and microbiology at Baylor College of Medicine—has been targeted for his vocal defense of science, evidence and lifesaving vaccines before.

“Unfortunately,” he said, “it’s part of the new normal.”

Don't put science up for debate

Dr. Hotez ultimately decided against the podcast appearance with Rogan and RFK Jr. That’s because “science is not something, typically, that we work through a debate mechanism,” he said. Instead, in science, “we write our papers, submit them to journals like … JAMA®. And it gets peer reviewed, sometimes rejected, requests for major revisions.”

There are also meetings—such as the AMA Annual Meeting—that allow physicians and biomedical scientists to present in front of critical audiences so they can respond to suggestions or criticisms and even go back to their laboratory to fix any potential problems.

“If I felt it was going to advance the science or advance the field, regardless of the money, I would have done it. But talking with someone like RFK Jr. around vaccines in public actually sets the field back,” Dr. Hotez said.

Know you’re not alone

“It looks like the attacks are continuing to step up. And, unfortunately, I’m in the middle of it or in some cases the lead, which is why I’m so grateful for the AMA—and why I was especially grateful to receive the Scientific Achievement Award,” Dr. Hotez said. “That kind of endorsement or backing from the AMA was so important for me, professionally, and is a sign to say that ‘We’ve got your back, Peter, and other biomedical scientists.’”

Dr. Hotez noted that he always jumps at the opportunity to do interviews with the AMA “because this is how you get the word out to … physicians and physician-scientists—that you’re not alone.”

The “AMA has been, really, one of the good guys through all of this and that’s deeply meaningful to me,” he said.
Show empathy for patients

“In your day-to-day practice, increasingly you have patients who are coming in—or parents of patients if you’re a pediatrician—with some pretty crazy ideas from stuff they’ve downloaded on the internet, and it’s very frustrating,” Dr. Hotez said. But it is important to “recognize that these individuals themselves are victims.

“They were targeted by politically motivated actors,” he added, noting that is why physicians should “look upon them with some sympathy and empathy as best you can do. That can help in the discussion.”

Let physicians speak up

Many physicians find that their ability to advocate on behalf of patients is unduly restricted by health care organizations concerned about adverse publicity.

But physicians are combating anti-science aggression “are doing this to save lives,” Dr. Hotez said, and health care organizational leaders should acknowledge that. “Otherwise, a vacuum is created and that whole vacuum is filled by anti-vaccine activists who promote dangerous health misinformation that falsely discredits vaccines or touts unproven treatments such as ivermectin.”

“If we are committed to saving lives, we’re going to have to find a way to work around this” Dr. Hotez said.

“AMA Update” covers health care topics affecting the lives of physicians and patients. Hear from physicians and experts on public health, advocacy issues, scope of practice and more—because who’s doing the talking matters. You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version, which also features educational presentations and in-depth discussions.