

Physicians must rise in coordinated response to COVID-19

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Patrice A. Harris, MD, MA

Former President

Physicians understand instinctively the best response in a health emergency is to remain calm and let our training and the science guide us.

It's important we remember this as news spreads about the global outbreak of the 2019 novel coronavirus, called SARS-CoV2, and the disease it causes—COVID-19. The medical community has a critical role to play during such emergencies, not only in diagnosing and treating patients but, just as importantly, as sources for timely, accurate and evidence-based information in the face of fear, anxiety, misinformation, and stigma. Now more than ever, it's critical to heed the expert advice of the highly trained physicians and scientists at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and around the world as we face this potential pandemic. Combating misinformation, whether it's spread unknowingly or with the intent to harm, is no easy task. Misinformation is rampant online and through social media, especially in times of great concern. We're witnessing that play out again as health officials across the world work to mitigate the impact of this latest outbreak and contain transmission of COVID-19.

Under these circumstances, containing misinformation about the novel coronavirus may rank second only to curbing the spread of COVID-19 itself. We recognize that fear is a natural human response to a public health threat about which so much remains unknown—and we also realize that fear can incapacitate us and inhibit an appropriate response.

Viruses simply don't target specific populations, ethnicities, or racial groups, and so as physicians we must be voices of reason and defend against the stigmatization of communities that are unfairly under scrutiny.

As the CDC tells us, people—including those of Asian descent—who have not recently traveled to China or been in contact with a person who is a confirmed or suspected case of COVID-19 are not at greater risk of acquiring and spreading COVID-19 than are other Americans.

Public trust in organizations such as the CDC, the NIH, and the World Health Organization (WHO), agencies that are leading the global response to COVID-19, is essential to containing global health threats. Undermining public trust through misinformation, conflicting messages, and other methods cripples that response and exacerbates fear.

At the AMA, we're working in tandem with the CDC to ensure physicians have the timely and accurate information they need to allay their patients' concerns and to help them appropriately prepare and plan for the possibility of a widespread COVID-19 outbreak in the U.S.

In partnership with the CDC, we have established a COVID-19 resource center for physicians for free on our JN Learning website and on the AMA website that, among other objectives:

- Shares the latest developments in the spread and management of the disease.
- Reviews the epidemiologic and clinical characteristics of novel coronavirus infections.
- Details methods to protect providers from becoming infected, provides tips on educating patients.
- Reviews the lessons learned from prior coronavirus and influenza epidemics to respond to possible sustained transmission.

Accurate information that is rooted in science and evidence is the most powerful weapon we have in the battle against a health emergency. Our patients will look to us to be that source for credible information, never more so than in times of high anxiety and fear. How we respond will play an important role in minimizing the impact of a potential COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S., and help doctors, hospitals and health officials mount an effective response to mitigate its impact.