This is war: We must tackle shortages hampering COVID-19 effort

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What’s the news: The U.S. government must “undertake a ‘Manhattan Project’ type effort to expand manufacturing capacity and produce the supplies needed to ensure the health security of our country” during the COVID-19 national emergency, AMA Executive Vice President and CEO James L. Madara, MD, wrote in a letter to Vice President Mike Pence. The vice president is leading the White House’s coronavirus task force.

Why it’s important: The nation’s doctors and health professionals are seeing shortages and limited access to the personal protective equipment (PPE) they need to stay safe and prevent nosocomial spread of COVID-19.

“Physicians on the frontlines are currently prioritizing PPE such as N95 respirators for those procedures that are at high risk for spreading COVID-19. Even regular surgical masks and gowns are reportedly in short supply,” Dr. Madara wrote.

Doctors have contacted state and local health departments, as well as the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response. Physicians have been told there is limited PPE available in the strategic national stockpile, and that it won’t be able to meet the needs of the nation’s health workforce.

Shortages are also being seen that affect the critical issue of diagnostic testing for the 2019 novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2.

“Reports from our physicians and our laboratory colleagues are that essential testing components such as reagents used in RNA extraction are in severe shortage. Shortages of these essential supplies are forcing physicians to severely restrict access to testing services, with significant concern that they will no longer be able to offer testing in the near future,” the AMA’s letter says. “The administration’s effort to increase access to testing will be critically hampered if there is a reagent
shortage."

The AMA has been working closely with various agencies within HHS wants to work constructively with the vice president the coronavirus task force to find “solutions to the health threats facing our nation,” Dr. Madara wrote. That includes addressing these critical shortages.

Learn more: The AMA has developed a COVID-19 resource center as well as a physician’s guide to COVID-19 to give doctors a comprehensive place to find the latest resources and updates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization.

The AMA’s COVID-19 FAQ will help physicians address patient concerns and offers advice on key issues such as how to optimize PPE supply.