

6 keys for retired physicians considering return to practice

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Kevin B. O'Reilly

News Editor

States across the nation are calling on retired physicians and other health professionals to consider reentering the workforce to help mitigate the strain on the U.S. health system that's a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

But for the many physicians moved to use their skills and training to help during a time of dire need, several factors combine to make reentry something less than a straightforward proposition. The AMA's senior physician COVID-19 resource guide outlines six keys that retired doctors should consider as they weigh a pandemic-inspired comeback to patient care.

Risk factors

AMA President Patrice A. Harris, MD, MA, noted that many physicians older than 65—who fall into a higher-risk category due to COVID-19's known epidemiology—are still active and providing patient care. Whether senior physicians “should be on the front line of patient care at this time is a complex issue that must balance several factors against the benefit these physicians can provide,” she added.

“As with all people in high-risk age groups, careful consideration must be given to the health and safety of retired physicians and their immediate family members, especially those with chronic medical conditions,” Dr. Harris said, noting that the shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) is another factor.

Retired physicians should consider whether they “will be able to protect themselves and their families with PPE to avoid becoming ill and an additional burden on the health care system,” Dr. Harris said. Read about the plea to the nation from doctors fighting COVID-19: #GetMePPE.

Other ways to help

The AMA's guidance notes retired physicians may be able to contribute meaningfully in a role that does not involve face-to-face patient care.

Take these steps to investigate such opportunities:

- Many health systems are assigning senior physicians to telehealth and administrative activities, which may free up others to be on the front line.
- Contact your local or state health department. Many are keeping listings of needed roles for volunteer physicians and health care workers.
- Medical schools are using senior physicians for online teaching and mentoring of medical students.
- Contact your medical school's dean's office to find out how you can participate.
- Consider making an appointment at your local Red Cross to donate blood.
- Provide online outreach to residents of nursing homes or senior residential communities to combat isolation.
- Explore opportunities to provide mentoring or training in your practice location. Many institutions have developed algorithms for telephone triage or assessment of symptomatic patients.

Questions volunteers should ask

If you are returning in a volunteer role, you should first seek clarity so that all involved are on the same page.

The AMA's guidance notes these essential questions to answer:

- What are the activities I'm being asked to do?
- Do those activities align with my skill set?
- What types of training, refreshers or mentoring will be provided?
- Will I be provided with PPE?

Licensure

In response to COVID-19, many states have taken action to allow retired physicians to temporarily return. The Federation of State Medical Boards offers a regularly updated list of states taking such actions with links to further information.

Often, these actions specify the physician's license must have been in good standing at the time of retirement. Many states have also indicated the physician must have been in active practice within the last two to five years. Given how quickly things are changing, senior physicians who have not maintained their license active and are interested in returning to practice should check with their state medical board for the latest information.

Medical liability

Explore coverage with your local health system. If you are licensed and volunteer, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act signed into law March 27 includes liability protections for volunteer health care professionals during COVID-19 emergency response. Learn more about what the \$2 trillion coronavirus relief plan means for doctors.

In addition, if you are authorized to prescribe and administer certain countermeasures to treat COVID-19, you may be immune from liability under the Public Readiness and Emergency Preparedness Act. Also check with your state medical association; you may have additional liability protections under state law, a recent gubernatorial executive order, or other emergency response programs such as the Uniform Emergency Volunteer Health Practitioners Act or the Emergency Management Assistance Compact.

Paid employment's impact

Some physicians are receiving retirement income that may be affected by a return to paid employment. You should check the status of your retirement income according to the role you are being asked to perform in returning to help.

Learn more: Stay up to speed on the AMA's COVID-19 advocacy efforts and track the fast-moving pandemic with the AMA's COVID-19 resource center, which offers a library of the most up-to-date resources from JAMA Network™, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the World Health Organization.