Strengthening cybersecurity to protect patients and physicians

Watch the AMA’s daily COVID-19 update, with insights from AMA leaders and experts about the pandemic.

Featured topic and speakers

AMA Chief Experience Officer Todd Unger speaks with AMA President Patrice Harris, MD, Senior Vice President, Advocacy, Todd Askew and Assistant Director of Federal Affairs, Laura Hoffman on updates regarding COVID-19 including the latest developments in cybersecurity and efforts to protect physicians and patients during the pandemic.

Learn more at the AMA COVID-19 resource center.

Transcript

**Unger:** Hello. This is the American Medical Association’s COVID-19 update. Today we’re talking about the latest developments in cybersecurity and other efforts to protect physicians and patients during the COVID-19 pandemic. I’m joined today by Dr. Patrice Harris, AMA’s president and a psychiatrist in Atlanta, Todd Askew, AMA senior vice president of advocacy in Washington D.C., and Laura Hoffman, AMA’s assistant director of federal affairs in Washington D.C. I’m Todd Unger, AMA’s chief experience officer in Chicago. COVID-19 has created an environment in which we’re all relying on technology more and with that has come increased security concerns. Dr. Harris, why are physicians particularly vulnerable to cyber threats right now?

**Dr. Harris:** Well, in our physicians’ commitment to physical distancing and also increasing access to patient care as well as preventing the spread of the disease, physicians are more and more using telehealth. They are using telehealth from their homes, so they’re using home computer systems. Unfortunately some of those home computer systems are subject and vulnerable to computer viruses, hacks and malware.
Hoffman: Adding to that, I would say there's really been a significant uptick in the threats that are focused specifically on COVID-19. People are taking advantage of this kind of vulnerable time where folks aren't using the systems that they're used to. Actually, the FBI just issued warning saying that they've received over 1200 complaints and its Internet Crime Complaint Center, specifically related to COVID-19 threats. There've been phishing campaigns against first responders, so trying to get people to click on malicious links in their emails. There's been ransomware at medical facilities. Even at the beginning of the pandemic, folks are taking what looked like very reputable sources, things from Johns Hopkins website, framing it as coming from Johns Hopkins trying to track the development of the disease when actually clicking on those links would download malware to an individual's computer. We're seeing that these trends will probably start to be pushed out to smaller businesses, individuals' homes and positions now using these telehealth resources for home.

Unger: Well, as if there weren't enough obstacles that physicians were facing right now. Todd, what is the AMA doing to help physicians protect themselves and their patients against threats like these?

Askew: Well, I think maybe Laura can turn to this, as we've produced some resources recently specifically designed to assist physicians with these concerns and provide some guidance to them as they kind of enter this new way of practicing medicine. So perhaps Laura can address what those resources are.

Hoffman: Sure, absolutely. We did have some existing resources on cybersecurity. We had a number of cyber security resources on our website. But we wanted to create something specifically again for physicians who are working from home. How they can kind of tweak their mobile devices, look at medical devices that maybe they're monitoring, their laptops, their computers that may also be interfacing with their practice networks and computers. We wanted to basically give them easy-to-understand tips and tools that will help keep those different entry points secure.

So in conjunction with the American Hospital Association, we developed a resource called Working from Home During the COVID-19 Pandemic. And basically, again, it offers guidance on trying to protect these remote work environments from cyber criminals. It gives some easy to understand checklists and sources you can look at to try to really tighten up the security on your devices and basically we're trying to again prevent disruptions to patient care that could occur while you're working from home so that you and your patients can remain safe.

Unger: Todd, AMA is also continuing its work on the legislative front to protect practices and patient care. A letter was written yesterday. Could you talk a little bit about your work with congressional leaders?

Askew: Sure, absolutely Todd. So the CARES Act provided a lot of resources for practices to try and stabilize them financially during the crisis. But clearly it's not enough and clearly this is going to be an ongoing effort to provide support for physician practices, both large and small in order to be able to
remain available to meet people’s healthcare needs during the crisis and also as we resume some sense of normalcy in the future. A couple of the important elements that we’re working to build on, what the CURES Act included were some improvements to the Medicare Advanced Payment Program. The Advanced Payment Program is a good opportunity for physicians to be able to take advanced payments of their expected Medicare revenues, but some of the terms are not that great. Recoupment starts very soon. The interest rate once in a later part of the recoupment period is quite high.

So we have a suggested, along with a large coalition, I think it was over 80 national medical specialties and I think in all 50 States and the District of Columbia medical societies supporting this effort to improve the terms of that Medicare advanced payment. We’ve also suggested more direct financial assistance similar to the emergency fund that was included in the CURES Act. A lot of physicians who don’t see a lot of Medicare patients didn’t really benefit very much from that. So we’ve also suggested changes to benefit groups like, especially pediatricians, psychiatrists, allergists and others, OBEs who don't see a lot of Medicare volume. So those are two of the things. Another aspect is liability. There's a lot of new stuff going on right now. A lot of potential liability exposure related to caring for patients with COVID-19 but also because we are putting off a lot of care. A lot of non-urgent care is being is being delayed and there is obviously a chance that could have some bad outcomes too.

So while these decisions are necessary and important, it's also critical that we provide some protection from the liability that could potentially arise from some of these decisions. So that's part of the conversation we're having as well. Congress typically, in their typical fashion is still going back and forth on priorities. But I do think that there is a strong sense in Congress that continued support for the healthcare system is one of the more critical elements as they work out what the next congressional package is going to be.

Unger: Dr. Harris, is there anything you'd like to add?

Dr. Harris: Yeah, I would. I think Todd’s comment on practice viability is so important. I am hearing from physicians all across the country that are worried whether or not their practice will be able to open after we get through the other side of this pandemic, particularly the smaller practices and particularly those in rural areas that they may be the only practice in town or at least for miles around. And it’s so very important that we do all that we can to maintain the viability of physician practices large and small. And so certainly physician practices are seeing a decrease in revenues. So all of the advocacy efforts of Todd and his team and of course the AMA writ large are very helpful and very important because there will be a pent up demand for those health needs that have been postponed right after we get through the acute phase of this pandemic. And so it is so critical to maintain practice viability throughout this pandemic.
Unger: Well thank you very much. That's it for today's COVID-19 update. I want to thank our guests, Dr. Patrice Harris, Todd Askew and Laura Hoffman. For additional resources on COVID-19, please check out the AMA COVID-19 resource center, where you'll find things like the guide to working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic that Laura talked about.

We'll be back on Monday with another update featuring three health system leaders with their views from the front lines. Thank you very much for joining us.

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