

Former AMA President Patrice A. Harris, MD, MA, on COVID-19 information overload

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 A. Harris, MD, MA, on updates regarding COVID-19 including the impact of disinformation and xenophobia in the COVID-19 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 impact of misinformation and disinformation in the COVID-19 pandemic. I'm joined today by Dr. Patrice Harris, AMA's president and a psychiatrist, and former County health director in Atlanta. Good morning, Dr. Harris.

Dr. Harris: Good morning, Todd.

Unger: I'd like to start by talking about one aspect of a lot of the focus on the origin of the COVID-19 virus, and the impact that it's been having on xenophobia in the United States. Can you talk a little bit about what we're seeing in that angle and what the AMA is doing?

Dr. Patrice Harris: Well, Todd, this is such an important topic because we have seen and heard reports from colleagues across this country, Asian-American presenting colleagues that they have been affected by this. There've been racist statements and negatively impacted, and this is really unacceptable, and it so belies the importance of making sure we are clear about the information that we get out about this pandemic.

Unger: And it also about the nomenclature, as this had a pretty dramatic impact.

Dr. Harris: Absolutely. Todd, as you have heard me say on many occasions, words matter and clarity counts, and so the AMA is encouraging everyone to adopt the WHO nomenclature, to call this the COVID-19 pandemic. This is caused by a novel coronavirus. We should absolutely not be using terms like Wuhan virus or Chinese virus. We really have to make sure we are using the appropriate nomenclature, so that we do not have any one segment of our population discriminated against.

Unger: Thank you. I think another kind of thread that we're seeing on social media today, and for the past week is around counts of coronavirus deaths. Some saying over counted, some saying under-counted, creating a lot of confusion. Can you provide any perspective on that?

Dr. Harris: I cannot and first let me start with saying that it is not easy, because there is a barrage of information out there. There are models, there are actual counts, and unfortunately each state is counting a little bit different. We also hear about delays in counting. For example, a count that comes out on Monday may actually be a count from last Friday, and so it's very confusing.

So the best way to mitigate this confusion is transparency, right? So we should be transparent and make sure we are clear and define what we are counting. What does a case count mean? Does that mean that it's the number of positives and from what period of time? Can we recount and should we be counting infections, actual illnesses, hospitalizations. So again, I can understand that confusion and that's why again, the AMA has called for standardized data collection, and then making sure that, that data is transmitted in a way that the public can understand.

Unger: There's always been a tremendous amount of misinformation in medicine, it's one of the reasons the AMA was founded, was to correct that. I think what we're seeing more broadly are more coordinated campaigns, too. So disinformation, how does the AMA and how do doctors help in this situation where it's so important to know the truth, and focus on the facts?

Dr. Harris: Well, first of all, the AMA and physicians across this country are committed to being credible sources of information. So we want our patients to know that they can come to us for the truth. And actually we want them to know that always, not just in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. So by again practicing what we preach, so to say, we have to make sure, and we do make sure that our information is credible.

Now I want everyone to know that it may change, because as evidence comes on board, we do need to change the information and that's critical too. That also means that we are trusted. We also want to make sure that when we see misinformation and disinformation, we call it out. In addition, the AMA has called on media and social media and those who host social media, the tech platforms, to make sure that they are disseminating only credible information. They should always ask questions, why



and who is giving out this information?

Unger: Yes, it is incredibly important when so many lives are on the line to stay focused on the science and the facts. Thank you so much, Dr. Harris. That's it for today's COVID-19 update.

You can find more fact based and evidence based information on COVID-19 in the AMA's COVID resource center at ama-assn.org/COVID-19. Thanks for being with us here today.

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