Graduating from medical school in the midst of a global pandemic spurs mixed emotions, including a sense of loss as in-person ceremonies are canceled and loved ones are unable to witness the accomplishment firsthand.

But the sheer joy this accomplishment generates—and the pride that is rightfully taken in such a momentous achievement—has not changed. This year’s medical school graduates have overcome obstacles no one imagined would be placed in their path.

Right now, the nation is relying on its doctors, nurses, scientists and other health professionals to guide us through a most tumultuous time. To that list of heroes we can add our nation’s graduating medical school students, as many of them joined the health care workforce to battle COVID-19 while completing their education.

It was my privilege to participate in a virtual celebration May 20 honoring this year’s medical school graduates. The AMA Tribute to the Medical School Class of 2020 was a joyous celebration of the talented young men and women who have answered the call to serve others at one of the most challenging moments in modern medicine.

Responding to the growing pandemic earlier this spring, medical schools in Massachusetts, New York, Ohio and other states allowed qualified fourth-year students to begin their internships early to bolster our front-line responders during a dramatic surge in COVID-19 patients

This action was not unprecedented. During World War I and again during World War II, U.S. medical students completed accelerated courses of study and graduated early to serve in the armed forces, and to help fill physician shortages on the home front.
Values put to the test

Completing medical school is a tremendous accomplishment, one that requires intellect, perseverance, courage, compassion, and a drive to help others. This year, graduate have been put to the test amid the most severe public health crisis our nation has witnessed in decades. In 2020, those with freshly minted MD and DO degrees will enter residency with a new sense of urgency to do their part to alleviate suffering, restore patients to health, and help bring the pandemic to an end.

Overcoming obstacles is a fact of life for any physician, at any stage of his or her career. The obstacles posed by COVID-19 are as complex and challenging as any we have faced in our lifetimes. We are just beginning to understand the risks posed by this virus to multiple organs in the human body, exactly how it is transmitted, and why some populations are impacted so disproportionately.

Medical school graduates will bring new energy, fresh insight and the will to overcome to the ranks of medical professionals working so hard today to answer these and other questions. We need them now more than ever.

I know that established physicians will eagerly continue the time-honored practice of mentoring today’s medical students, interns and residents. The wisdom generated by practical and clinical experience takes on even greater value when it is shared with those who are just now launching their careers.

Finally, I am encouraged and heartened to see more women and people of color joining our nation’s physician workforce. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the need to deliver compassionate and equitable care.

Today and far into the future, a more diverse physician workforce will help our nation meet the moral imperative to ensure that everyone, in every situation, receives access to high-quality, evidence-based medical care.