AMA Immediate Past President Patrice A. Harris, MD

In her farewell speech at the Special Meeting of the House of Delegates on June 7, 2020, outgoing AMA President Patrice A. Harris, MD, emphasized that it’s up to America’s physicians and the AMA, to be the voices the country can trust in times of trial.

Dr. Harris, an Atlanta-based psychiatrist, was the second of three consecutive female presidents for the AMA and its first African-American female president. Video of her address and a transcript of her remarks is below.

Transcript

June 7, 2020

The value of trust in a time of crisis

Mister Speaker, officers, trustees, delegates and physician colleagues:

Gratitude.

I have made it a habit to practice gratitude as I have traveled on both my personal and professional journeys, through twists and turns, successes and setbacks, joy and pain. So let me start there.

It has been an honor and a privilege to have served as president of the American Medical Association and I am grateful for the support of many of my “families.”

So first, a thanks to you, my AMA family.

A great thanks to my psychiatry family.

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My Georgia and Atlanta families.

My West Virginia family.

To the sorors of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.

And to my personal family, who have been steadfast in their support for me these many years.

I also want to take a moment to recognize the service of our Board Chair, Dr. Jesse Ehrenfeld. It has been a pleasure to serve with him this past year.

A note of recognition and thanks to our departing trustees:

- Dr. William Kobler
- Dr. William McDade
- Ms. Sara Mae Smith
- Mr. Kevin Williams

And what a wonderful opportunity to have served with Drs. Barbara McAneny and Sue Bailey. A terrific trio or as I have come to call us, “We Three.”

Barbara, thank you for your many years of unparalleled advocacy for physicians.

Sue, thank you for all your years at the helm of the House of Delegates, and I wish you all the best as you become the 175th president of our beloved AMA.

And I can’t let this moment go by without a note of gratitude for figures, both seen and hidden, who have advanced progress in science and medicine.

Historical figures:

- Elizabeth Blackwell
- Rebecca Lee Crumpler
- Katherine Johnson

Modern-day trailblazers:

- Nancy Dickey
- Lonnie Bristow
And Henrietta Lacks, who until recently was invisible yet ubiquitous, and whose contribution to medicine and science is immeasurable.

One of the many privileges afforded the president of our AMA is to travel the world, or, to quote the illustrious Dr. Seuss, to “go off to great places.”

And along the way, in those great places, I have met and been inspired by physicians and trainees whose work brings our AMA mission to life:

- A family physician in Alaska practicing in a remote part of the state.
- A young physician from Pennsylvania who is working to ensure equitable treatment for those who have a substance-use disorder.
- An African-American medical student in Illinois, the first in her family to go to college, juggling supporting family back home while studying for exams.

I have also met non physicians who have shown me just how much our mission matters:

- A taxi driver and Iraq War veteran who told me he had great respect for physicians and that he knew that our journey was one of hard work and long years, and he just wanted to say thanks.
- A teacher in Metro Atlanta who shared a story of a first grader in her class who wanted to grow up to be a doctor because she was inspired by my story.
- And a sorority sister whose mother told her during this pandemic, “I’m not going out until Patrice and the AMA says it’s okay to go out!”

And finally, a destination I could never have imagined. My journey has taken me to this wonderful place, the pinnacle of leadership in organized medicine.

I am often asked what makes a great leader?

Great leaders are not those interested in the title or the corner office.

We know who they are, but that’s not who we are.

Great leaders are about the work. Great leaders dream. They dare to inspire. Dare to challenge. Dare to have difficult conversations. Dare to take risks.

That is an apt description for what we do at the AMA, and those qualities have been particularly important at this moment.

Three months ago, all of our lives, indeed our way of life, changed dramatically.
In the United States, more than 1.7 million people have become infected with COVID-19 and more than 100,000 have died.

I want us to pause on that just a moment because these are people, with families and loved ones who are grieving them, and they deserve a moment of pause.

Our country—indeed our world—is being challenged as never before. Challenged by a novel virus for which there is not yet a specific treatment or vaccine. Physicians are challenged by a lack of resources and PPE. Challenged by a political climate that is highly polarized; challenged by the rampant spread of misinformation and disinformation.

In November, I gave a speech about physicians matching the moment and continuing to earn public confidence in an era of mistrust. I spoke about how patients still trust us, their physicians, even though they’ve lost trust in other institutions and professions.

I spoke about competency, truth-telling, compassion and purpose, the elements of trust, noting that in this era of distrust, the AMA is just what the doctor ordered.

Little did any of us realize at the time how dramatically we would be put to the test. But “match the moment” we have.

Physicians are working long hours in offices and hospitals; sleeping in their basements or hotels so they do not infect family members; working overtime to develop vaccines and treatments; countering the endless false narratives circulating across media channels; and reopening medical practices so we can meet the postponed health needs of our patients.

On an organizational level, our AMA has pressured Congress and the administration to accelerate production of PPE, test kits and ventilators.

We have lobbied for regulatory changes to facilitate remote patient visits, and fought for financial support for small and independent practices.

We have fought for freedom of speech so physicians can raise concerns about the lack of resources without fear of retribution or punishment.

We have used our national platform to call on leaders to focus on science and evidence in all decision-making.

And it is those acts of competence, truth-telling, compassion, and purpose that will ultimately lead us through this pandemic …

Around this time last year, we were in Chicago and after days of work on policy, we celebrated my
inauguration. This is one of my favorite photos from that celebration.

[Shows photo.]

Pictured are the men of my family from the youngest, Che, who is an outstanding scholar athlete, to the eldest, my uncle Ellis Ray Williams, a distinguished educator/principal and WWII veteran.

Our AMA gave them a warm welcome, so much so that at the end of the evening, my cousin exclaimed “I love the AMA.”

But unfortunately, as we have seen, outside of the walls of the Hyatt Regency, these same family members are not safe to jog, or bird watch, or drive or even breathe.

I do have hope, however, but that hope is up to us.

It is up to us, America’s physicians and the AMA, to demonstrate how to understand more, and to fear less, to be the voices our country can trust in this time of trial, and to lead on action to move us forward in this difficult, perilous time.

In the words of King T’Challa, “More connects us than separates us.” And “in times of crisis the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers.”

174 physicians have had the honor of the presidency of the American Medical Association, a position that gives voice to the concerns and work of our profession, and I am so grateful to be in that number.

Today, though my tenure as president will end, my work will continue.

| I will continue work to ensure patients are prioritized over politics and profits, and to fight any intrusions in the patient-physician relationship |
| To ensure that as delivery systems are redefined, that the physician voice is heard loudly and clearly |
| I will work to ensure that mental health is integrated into overall health and that there is action to address the physical and psychological consequences of early traumatic experiences |
| To achieve equity and justice within the walls of our exam rooms; the health-delivery system, the halls of Congress, and our justice system |

My promise to you is that I will be guided by the direction of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his final Sunday sermon— “to remain awake through a great revolution.”

And so, as I speak to you for the last time as president of the American Medical Association, please know that this “psychiatrist is in.”
[Shows Lucy from "Peanuts."]

Thank you.