New AMA president Susan Bailey, MD, on helping doctors be doctors

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 the AMA's new president, Susan Bailey, MD, about what's it like to begin her term during the COVID-19 pandemic. Learn more at the AMA COVID-19 resource center.

Speakers

- Susan R. Bailey, MD, AMA president

Transcript

Unger: Hello, this is the American Medical Association's COVID-19 Update. Today, we're talking to the AMA's new president about what it's like to begin her term during a pandemic. I'm joined today by Dr. Susan Bailey, AMA's new president and an allergist and immunologist in Fort Worth, Texas. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer in Chicago.

Dr. Bailey, first, congratulations on your recent inauguration. I know this is not how you expected to begin your AMA presidency. You've been thinking about I'm sure what you'd like to accomplish during your presidency for months or even years. How have your priorities shifted in light of the pandemic?

Dr. Bailey: Well, thanks Todd. It's so wonderful to be here and I'm so honored to serve this year as AMA President. If there's any group that understands the importance of how a health emergency can change well thought out plans, it's physicians. And when we realized that we would not be able to have the annual meeting and that really our world had changed, my original priorities, which were to just let doctors be doctors, help them with the administrative burdens and the payment inequities that
they have to deal with, help them with burnout, physician suicide, work on health equity. None of those plans really changed, but they've become more acutely focused. I think the pandemic has exposed a lot of cracks in our health system that we knew were already there, but my priorities are still the same. To help doctors be doctors, help them get the tools that they need to take the best care of their patients.

**Unger:** Well with so much uncertainty ahead, where do you see the greatest opportunities, both for the AMA and our nation's physicians to help our country heal?

**Dr. Bailey:** We have made incredible strides in just the last couple of months in many areas of medicine. First of all, I think we've got the country's attention on how important a stable, healthy workforce is. We've learned so much about telemedicine. We've made incredible progress on that in the last couple of months, and I'm looking forward to having the opportunity to make sure that that doesn't just all go away when our emergency state ends. Now we know how important the supply chain is in health care to be able to keep doctors and patients safe. And there are many other cracks that have been laid bare that will give us a golden opportunity to shine a light on them and get to work to improve them.

**Unger:** Well, you've been part of the COVID update since we've started this, and you're a small practice owner, learning telemedicine along with the rest of physicians, and you've been a champion for small and independent practices. What role do you see private practices playing in our nation's recovery and how do we give them relief in light of the challenges they're facing right now?

**Dr. Bailey:** Private practices are really, and always have been, the backbone of our health care system and where many, many of our patients prefer to get their medical care. We need to make sure that first of all, that we can save private practices that are floundering during the pandemic because patients haven't been coming to see them. And I believe that private practices can serve as a model for small businesses in general, because that's what they are and how to open safely, how to get your employees back, how to ramp your business back up again, pick up where you left off in the pandemic.

**Unger:** Well, you've been a very strong advocate for both patients and physicians through what has been a 40 year tenure with the AMA. That is hard to believe. What other advocacy issues are at the top of your list as you take over the presidency?

**Dr. Bailey:** There are a number of administrative burdens that we have been working on through the years that we must continue to work on. The ridiculous requirements that physicians have to meet, just to be able to take care of their patients, prior authorizations, electronic medical records that don't work well and don't talk to each other. Ridiculous hoops you have to jump through to get paid for your services. Current Medicare reimbursement does not cover the cost of running a practice, and that's not a system that we can perpetuate into the future. And in general, I think we need to build on the successes of the Affordable Care Act and getting more people insured and fixing the problems that
are in the Affordable Care Act. How to take care of more people with Medicaid, that's incredibly important, but not to throw out the whole system for a single payer. I think that we're not a one size fits all nation and a one size fits all payment and delivery system won't work for America.

**Unger:** Well, your presidency is historic for many reasons, not the least of which is you are now the third consecutive woman to become an AMA president. It's a first in AMA history. How do you hope to use this moment to be a role model for other women?

**Dr. Bailey:** Well, it is quite an honor and I've just enjoyed so much this past year, working with past president, Barb McAneny and past president now, Dr. Patrice Harris, they've been incredible role models. And we just really, really had a good time, focusing the spotlight on women and medicine. But I'm the 175th president of the AMA. And so since there have only been six that have been women, we've clearly still got a long way to go. We don't want this just to be a fluke that there just happened to be a few women presidents, and then it doesn't happen again for a long time. That's not acceptable. There aren't enough women in leadership roles in academic medicine and other types of leadership in medicine. And we still have to continue to be quite intentional about making sure that women have the opportunities that they need.

And I'm excited that the pandemic and working from home has made, I think everybody realize how incredibly challenging and yet how incredibly rewarding it can be managing your practice and taking care of your family at the same time. And I'm a mom. I raised two children as a single parent in private practice. So I definitely know what that's like. And I think that we need to make sure that all families have the opportunity to raise their children and work in the fashion that they choose. We certainly don't want to lose ground and think, oh well, let's just let the women stay home and let the men go back to work. No, that's not how we're going to do this from here on out. And I hope it'll give women better opportunities in academia realizing that, okay yeah, you can take care of your family and progress at the same time.

**Unger:** Well, you said before that growing up, your heroes were physicians. Now that you're leading the nation's largest physician organization, what is the one message you'd like to say to physicians right now?

**Dr. Bailey:** I would like for physicians to know that the power of the American Medical Association is behind them, that they have this incredible ally that's helping them solve the problems that they have and that they encounter when taking care of their patients. The AMA has the resources, it has the breadth, it has the depth, it has the reach that we need as America's physicians to help take better care of our patients. And they're not alone. Docs, you're not alone. The AMA is with you on this journey.

**Unger:** Well, finally, I asked this question of Dr. Harris recently. Now I'll ask you the same one. In this time, which has been a lot of darkness and a lot of bad news, what gives you hope?
Dr. Bailey: We are in a dark place right now, living in a country that a world that may be changed forever and in a divided and wounded nation, but medicine has always been about hope. That's why we take care of patients because we hope for a better, healthier, happier life for them. And that hope never will die. I'm so pleased that our nation's health system has withstood this challenge of the pandemic. It's highlighted how incredibly nimble it can be when it wants to be, how rapidly scientific advancements can happen when there's a need. We will see the end of this pandemic. We just have to stick together, and I'm very hopeful that out of this darkness, we can bring forth an American health care system that's healthier than ever.

Unger: Well, thank you very much, Dr. Bailey, we are so excited to have you as our new president, and so excited to welcome you to your first segment on the COVID-19 update as our president and the first of many, many more. Thanks for being with us here today. That's it for today's COVID-19 Update. We'll be back tomorrow with another segment.

In the meantime, for updated resources on COVID-19 go to ama-assn.org/COVID-19. Thanks for being with us here today and take care.

Dr. Bailey: Thank you.

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