

# We can't allow pandemic to set back women physicians' advancement

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Ten years ago, Susan R. Bailey, MD, an allergist and immunologist from Fort Worth, was president of the Texas Medical Association while also teaching doctors. Today she is the president of the AMA. A lot has changed in the past decade, with health systems reporting significant advances in gender diversity and inclusion. But have these advancements resulted in meaningful change?

“We have made great strides. In terms of 10 years ago, we had only had two women presidents of the AMA. Now we've had six, with three in a row,” Dr. Bailey said during a panel discussion for Modern Healthcare's Women Leaders in Healthcare Conference. “We have made some progress as far as that goes, but in terms of women in academic medicine, very similar to what we see in the corporate world, the numbers are still frighteningly low.”

Every September, the AMA celebrates women physicians, residents and students during Women in Medicine Month. In 2020, the pandemic has posed another set of challenges for women physicians to surmount. This September, the AMA is thanking and recognizing women physicians tirelessly advancing equity and creating change.

During the panel discussion, Dr. Bailey shared some ways to continue to advocate for women in medicine and amplify their voices.

## Elevate women of color

In medicine, all women's voices should be elevated. However, it is vital that voices of women of color are further amplified.

“The AMA as an organization realized a couple years ago that we really needed to be more active in the realm of health equity,” said Dr. Bailey, adding that the Commission to End Health Disparities,

which included representatives from the AMA, National Medical Association and National Hispanic Medical Association had “reached the end of its lifespan.”

But the AMA chose to “take the whole project on themselves and” developed the Center for Health Equity, she said. “Part of that effort not only is to achieve health equity amongst the patients of America, but we are trying to embed equity into everything we do in the organization.”

“A result of that has been to take a more honest look at the hiring disparities within the AMA as an organization,” said Dr. Bailey, adding that the AMA has also “been very active in trying to work on mentorships and sponsorships for women in minority groups.”

“We’ve got to be incredibly intentional about hiring and selecting people to make sure we have the right outcomes,” she said.

## Share responsibilities at home

At the beginning of the pandemic, Dr. Bailey participated in a panel discussion in which participants talked about working from home. She expressed hope that there would be a greater appreciation for the value of work-life balance and of the many roles that women play in ensuring things run smoothly.

However, “one of the worst things that could happen would be for everyone to decide when it was time to go back to work that we’ll just keep the women home ... and lose about 50 years of progress that we’ve made for women in the workforce,” she said. “Unfortunately, we’re seeing some of that happen. Women are much less likely to get published during this time.”

It is also apparent that stay-at-home efforts have widened the achievement gap again.

“It is just absolutely tragic that we’re going to lose some of the ground that we’ve made,” said Dr. Bailey. “We need to use this opportunity to highlight how both partners in a marriage—and in a family—can benefit from sharing both of the responsibilities and not just shove all the issues back under the rug again.”

In an episode of the “AMA COVID-19 Update,” experts discuss the unique challenges women physicians face in the pandemic.

### Support women colleagues

“Women physicians have suffered a higher rate of burnout than male physicians for a long time,” said Dr. Bailey. But with the rapid uptake of videoconferencing, more people are comfortable using these platforms to connect.

Through virtual meetings, “it is so much easier to get groups” of women together, she said. “It’s not in person, but I do think it’s better than nothing. It’s a lot easier to set up ... people don’t necessarily have to find child care and it’s easier to hop on and off if something else comes up.”

“Taking advantage of these types of formats, you need a champion that makes sure it happens. In my county, it’s the county medical society that does that,” said Dr. Bailey, adding that “effort has to be intentional, but doing it remotely can really make it a lot easier for women to participate.”

Learn more about the?AMA’s work to advance gender equity in medicine.