

These councils shape doctors' future. Now they're all led by women.

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Sara Berg, MS

Senior News Writer

Women in medicine are creating change, blazing their own path in a historically male-dominated profession. But with the COVID-19 pandemic deepening the longstanding inequities and crises in the health care system, the need for women's leadership has never been more urgent. Fortunately, the AMA's leadership has helped fulfill that need with three consecutive female presidents—including the first Black woman to hold the office.

And now comes another first—all of the physicians serving as chairs of the AMA's seven councils in the 2020–2021 term are women. Six of the councils submit reports directly to the AMA House of Delegates for consideration. These are all elected positions.

The Council on Legislation differs from the others in that it submits reports and makes recommendations directly to the AMA Board of Trustees. The AMA Council on Long Range Planning and Development also may present its reports to the Board of Trustees or to the HOD.

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.

The seven women physician council chairs took time to discuss what this means for the AMA and how mentorship plays a role. Here is what they had to say.

1 AMA Council on Constitution and Bylaws: Madelyn E. Butler, MD

It is a historic moment that all council chairs are women this year “because I started coming to the AMA when I was very young,” said Dr. Butler, an ob-gyn in Florida. “I remember when I would walk into the House of Delegates and see that there were not a lot of women or minorities seated as delegates.”

“Now it’s refreshing because when you walk into the AMA. You see people of all different ages, different stages in their medical careers, and all of us have something to contribute,” she said. “This is not to say that the perspective of older men is not appreciated, because they bring a wealth of knowledge as far as how medicine has changed and they have gone through a lot of changes that led us to where we are right now.”

“It’s important to see women in leadership that way it becomes commonplace so that, nationally speaking, we get more women appointed and elected to councils, more women that step up to be chair of boards, councils and organizations they serve on,” said Dr. Butler. “A woman’s voice is valuable, and we should be included, not just because we’re women, but because we have a lot of experience, a different perspective and we have a lot to offer just like men.”

The AMA Council on Constitution and Bylaws is responsible for reviewing rules and regulations for AMA sections.

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AMA Council on Science and Public Health: Kira A. Geraci-Ciardullo, MD

For Dr. Geraci-Ciardullo, an allergist and immunologist in New York, public health has played a leading role in her life and career. From advocating for better air systems at schools for people with asthma to becoming part of a task force that trains physicians in recognizing bioterrorism threats and emergency preparedness issues, she has always been actively involved in public health issues. That led her to this council.

As an extension of that, Dr. Geraci-Ciardullo became part of the 2006 Influenza Planning Committee to create Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and Response Plans to implement throughout the state. Those same issues became apparent for the COVID-19 pandemic and she continues to work with the state to update the pandemic preparedness plan.

But she didn’t join immediately. It took some convincing from her mentor, Anne Cea, MD, a radiologist, the second female president of the Westchester County Medical Society and

first woman president of the Medical Society of the State of New York.

With support from Dr. Cea and encouragement to be part of the AMA delegation from New York in 2005, Dr. Geraci-Ciardullo enthusiastically accepted because, “I love the Council on Science and Public Health. I love their reports. I would read them cover to cover.”

Dr. Cea “was with me the whole time. She was with me when I was just in practice and she was with me through the Medical Society of New York and the AMA,” said Dr. Geraci-Ciardullo.

The Council on Science and Public Health works to represent the AMA's core belief that scientific evidence is the basis for improving the quality of patient care, promoting medical progress and enhancing the health of the public.

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AMA Council on Legislation: Marilyn J. Heine, MD

Many already know that Dr. Heine, a hematology-oncology and emergency physician in southeast Pennsylvania, is a passionate advocate for patients and physicians.

“It's super important that we serve as a resource, not only for policymakers, but also for our colleagues who are interested to learn more about legislation and regulation that impact our practice of medicine. We help cultivate their interest and ability to advocate as well,” said Dr. Heine. “I like to consider 3 R's in advocacy with legislators: the value of Relationships, “Radar” or keeping our issues top-of-mind, and telling our patient's story to make the issue Real.”

Dr. Heine credits her inspiration and mentorship to “many wonderful individuals.”

“One was my father who took me to the polls when I was 8 to emphasize the value of voting. It was obviously a memorable experience,” she said. “He inspired me to consider that if something is worth attaining, it is worth fighting for and it's really important to persevere.”

“My uncle was a cardiologist and medical educator. When I was starting out, he said that if you want to make a difference, be involved in organized medicine,” said Dr. Heine. “My friend Ann LaBelle who was a lobbyist among many other positions demonstrated how to effectively advocate and the importance of building lasting relationships with policymakers.”

“I’m honored to foster open communication, to be an AMA advocacy ambassador and to support other physicians who are interested in advocacy to advance our profession,” she said.

The AMA Council on Legislation makes recommendations to the Board of Trustees about legislation, legislative principles which help guide AMA advocacy on emerging issues, and draft model state legislation to aid state medical societies in their advocacy.

4 AMA Council on Long Range Planning and Development: Shannon Pryor, MD

Dr. Pryor, an otolaryngologist in Maryland, was drawn to the Council on Long Range Planning and Development because she felt her medical education came up short in terms of teaching physicians “how to respond to the environment” in which they practice.

“We’re not taught what our choices are in terms of how to deal with the people and the things around us, and the regulations that come down on us,” she said. “It’s so critical that we respond to the environment most appropriately.”

“What’s really fun about this council is that we ... look at the big picture,” said Dr. Pryor. “It’s a great opportunity to give back to the profession because we can provide some of that information or some of that education that’s missing in the traditional formal education that we got as physicians.”

“It’s a wonderful role in which we can work with people,” she said, referring to younger generations of physicians and mentoring. “I love talking about the different opportunities and also about building a core foundation locally and getting involved in your hospital now with the medical staff, getting involved with your county and state medical society and how that all plays into the work that you do with the AMA.”

“I’m glad we have such a talented group of women to work with, even as we all navigate very new waters together,” said Dr. Pryor.

Council on AMA Long Range Planning and Development studies long-term strategic issues related to the Association’s mission.

5 AMA Council on Medical Education: Liana Puscas, MD

“The really nice thing about the Council on Medical Education is that it deals with the whole spectrum of medical education issues,” said Dr. Puscas, an otolaryngologist in North Carolina. “We are not limited to just one section of this journey, but we can impact physicians’ lives and careers along the entire continuum of education.”

Dr. Puscas said she hopes “to be a chair who listens and who facilitates a conversation to make sure that everyone is heard and that the opposing viewpoints are well discussed so that we can reach a position for the council that is reflective of the best policy.”

The AMA Council on Medical Education recommends educational policies to the House of Delegates.

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AMA Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs: Monique A. Spillman, MD, PhD

When Dr. Spillman, a gynecologic oncologist in Texas, first joined the AMA, “it was rare to see a woman there.” However, she remembers how proud everyone was when Nancy Dickey, MD, became the first woman president of the AMA in 1998.

“I’ve benefited from the mentorship from Dr. Dickey,” she said. “In particular, I invited Dr. Dickey to speak to the Texas Medical Society Medical Student Section for a meeting and we were running about five minutes behind and she looked at me and said, ‘You now have 25 minutes of my time left; I suggest you get moving.’”

“It was one of the best lessons about being a prompt leader and valuing everyone’s time that I ever learned, and I’ve never forgotten it,” said Dr. Spillman, who hopes to also be a mentor for younger women members of the council.

“You will find that among all of the AMA women leaders: a supportive person who celebrates with you when you have celebrations, and is sad with you when something doesn’t go the way you want it to—but helps you pick up those pieces,” she said.

The AMA Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs has two primary responsibilities. Through its policy development function, it maintains and updates the *AMA Code of Medical Ethics*. In its judicial function, it promotes adherence to the Code’s professional ethical standards.

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AMA Council on Medical Service: Lynda M. Young, MD

“I was very fortunate to get elected to the council on my first try. I had only been an alternate delegate for several years and I had just finished up my presidency of the Massachusetts Medical Society (MMS), and I was encouraged to put my name in to run for the council,” said Dr. Young, a pediatrician in Worcester, Massachusetts. “I was really just so honored to be able to get elected, and I have had such a phenomenal experience.”

On her road to the presidency of MMS, Dr. Young followed in the footsteps of Alice Coombs, MD, the state medical society’s first Black woman president.

“She and I had just an incredible couple of years together and she kept saying to do this,” said Dr. Young. “I watched how she worked. I watched how she went around and connected with people. I watched the respect that she had for people and I really learned a lot from her.”

Just as Dr. Coombs was a mentor to her, Dr. Young actively engages with medical students and residents. She has also had “younger women who are looking to get into more leadership roles” reach out to her for guidance.

“I mentor the medical students and residents that asked me to, and that’s been really enriching for me too,” said Dr. Young.

The AMA Council on Medical Service studies socioeconomic aspects that influence the practice of medicine.

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