

Marking the tragic milestone of 200,000 COVID-19 deaths

SEP 22, 2020

Susan R. Bailey, MD

President

Our country this week passed the somber milestone of 200,000 confirmed deaths to COVID-19, an epic tragedy of lives cut short that touches communities in every state. These are not just numbers on a spreadsheet; these are moms and dads, spouses and children, beloved grandparents, favorite aunts, uncles and cousins.

These include more than 1,000 physicians, nurses and other health care workers, as well as police officers and first responders. These are teachers and students, small-business owners, family breadwinners and civic leaders—the backbone of our local communities.

The full measure of COVID-19's impact may not be known for some time. And it's possible, even likely, that the death toll from this pandemic has been severely undercounted from the beginning.

But reaching 200,000 confirmed deaths is a staggering loss to consider. It exceeds the total number of American combat deaths since World War II. It surpasses the populations of Akron, Ohio, Little Rock, Arkansas, or Knoxville, Tennessee. At its apex earlier this summer, someone died from COVID-19 every 80 seconds.

The virus has devastated families and entire communities, and brought immeasurable heartache to vulnerable populations, including seniors and those already struggling with chronic illness and other underlying conditions.

In many cases, the families and friends of those who lost their lives could not be by their sides when they passed. The pain of this pandemic is further aggravated by the delays or cancellations of wakes, funerals, memorial services and other traditional methods of dealing with such a tremendous loss. There may be limits on in-person attendance, but there is no limit to the sorrow felt by survivors and all those who lose the chance to say goodbye.

A *Washington Post* analysis published in August documented the fact that Blacks and Latinos are infected, hospitalized and dying from COVID-19 at far higher rates than white people—and are dying

at significantly younger ages. Data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention continue to show significantly higher rates of COVID-19 infection, hospitalization and death among the Black, Latino and American Indian populations.

Our AMA supports federal legislation to collect and disseminate comprehensive, standardized and transparent national demographic data that measures COVID-19 testing, treatment and outcomes by race, ethnicity, tribal affiliation, socioeconomic and disability status, and county. Doing so is essential to the tasks of optimal resource distribution in this pandemic and preventing disparities and inequities in our health care system going forward.

What we should do now

It is impossible to say with any certainty how many more lives will be lost to COVID-19, or precisely when we will be free to resume the lives we knew before. Until then, there are concrete steps we must encourage our patients and loved ones to take:

- | Get a flu shot.
- | Wear a mask each time you leave home.
- | Maintain physical distancing of at least 6 feet.
- | Avoid large gatherings, especially indoors.

Our AMA will continue to vigorously advocate for:

- | Adequate supplies of personal protective equipment for physicians and other health care workers.
- | Health policy decision-making based on evidence-based science.
- | Food and Drug Administration approval of a COVID-19 vaccine only after it has proven to be safe and effective.
- | Equitable allocation of that vaccine based on degree of risk, occupation and other criteria set in advance.

Each of us must do everything possible to limit the spread of COVID-19. Failing to do our part will prolong the suffering and disruption to our lives, and inevitably lead to more deaths.

Our nation has taken on immense challenges before, which were overcome through determination, resilience and no small amount of sacrifice. Defeating this virus will require these qualities and more—and it is incumbent on each of us to start with the steps outlined above.

Two hundred thousand deaths from COVID-19 is 200,000 too many. Early in the pandemic,



projections of that scale of loss represented a worst-case scenario. We cannot be numb. We should not just learn to live with the virus. We will defeat it, and until then we must do everything in our power to limit its deadly spread.