The patient-physician relationship, foundational to the profession of medicine and healing, relies on open and honest dialogue and an unwavering trust that we are making decisions about our patients’ health and livelihoods free of undue influence or conflicts of interest. The same is true for our public health institutions and our health system at large—especially in a time of great urgency and crisis.

During this COVID-19 pandemic, physicians are unfortunately fighting a two-front war. Already facing one of the greatest threats to public health in generations, we have been pulled into a public battle we did not want over the very legitimacy of our work and our motivation. The assault on public health and the undermining of efforts to defeat COVID-19 began with unfounded suspicions about the science and evidence of this novel coronavirus and how it spreads. It grew with speculation about harmful and unproven treatments for COVID-19, false claims that masks were a source of infections, and by misleading suggestions that increased testing alone explains why case counts are surging. It expanded again with inaccurate, dangerous statements about children being “almost immune” from the most serious effects of COVID-19, a reckless plan of “focused protection” and naturally acquired “herd immunity” as a pathway out of this pandemic, and most recently with wild and highly offensive claims that physicians are inflating the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths to increase our incomes. At every turn, at the highest levels of government, our motives and efforts are undermined, questioned and discredited in a misguided attempt to downplay the seriousness of the pandemic we continue to fight.

Many physicians, nurses and other health care personnel have died, and many more have fallen ill, while treating our patients. Public health officials have been threatened and intimidated, prompting some to retire or quit critical positions. All have worked tirelessly and under considerable stress and strain to turn the tide against COVID-19. We know these numbers surely will grow in the weeks ahead as the accelerating pace of this pandemic places enormous pressure on our already crowded hospitals and front-line physicians and first responders. A continued campaign of misinformation and disinformation at this urgent hour is an unconscionable betrayal of the public trust that jeopardizes our
work and endangers lives.

Trust more critical than ever

The U.S. is rapidly approaching 9 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, far surpassing every other country on earth. More than 225,000 of our fellow citizens have died and thousands more cling to life in crowded intensive care units across the country as cases surge ever higher. Soon we will enter another critical period of this pandemic, a time when we will ask the public to trust the work of scientists, researchers and physicians, and get vaccinated against this virus.

A safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine will be a remarkable feat, and a true turning point in the pandemic. The language we use about this accelerated process and the checks and balances meant to ensure safety and efficacy is critical. We cannot afford to lose the faith of our patients. Not when so much death and suffering has already occurred. Not when physicians—and our entire health care community—have already paid so steep a price.

Our AMA will always stand on the side of patients and physicians, of science and evidence, and of free and honest conversations that build the trust that is so crucial to our work. We will not hesitate to call out political intimidation and fear-driven rhetoric that undermines this trust or that interferes with our ability to deliver the very best care to patients. Anything less is a rejection of the oath we take as physicians, and of the ethical principles that guide our profession.