Our nation needs a unified and comprehensive pandemic response

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After a year of profound illness and death brought on by a global pandemic, and with much difficult work ahead of us to defeat COVID-19, all of us should heed the calls for unity and healing as we prepare to swear in a new president to lead our nation’s response to this worsening health crisis. But we cannot stop there.

Unity and cooperation is absolutely essential in this challenging new phase of the pandemic—one where states and local communities are rapidly trying to scale distribution of COVID-19 vaccines to stem the surges that are flooding our emergency departments and intensive care units. With two safe and effective vaccines now in hand, it has been disheartening to see the distribution process in many states slowed and severely hampered by unrealistic expectations and a lack of coordination at the federal level. This inaction at the highest level of our government has placed yet another daunting burden on the shoulders of state and local officials who often lack the resources, guidance and support to handle a health emergency of this magnitude on their own.

National strategy needed

The urgency of this moment demands a comprehensive and coordinated federal response, which is why the AMA is calling upon the incoming Biden administration to implement a national strategy and provide states and local jurisdictions with additional resources, guidance and support to enable rapid distribution and administration of vaccines. We urge the Biden administration to talk with states to identify gaps in vaccine distribution and to work collaboratively to address all areas of concern.

And we call for the new administration to develop a more robust national strategy for continued
COVID-19 testing and production of PPE for physicians and other health care workers by tapping into the full powers of the Defense Production Act.

We learned much in our response to COVID-19 in 2020. But the important lesson for this moment, and for the year ahead, is that state and local officials can’t do it all themselves. Fifty different strategies across 50 states will only continue to sow confusion and slow the vaccine distribution process.

What physicians can do

There are many reasons to be optimistic about 2021, but we cannot afford to give any ground to this very deadly virus. The death toll continues to soar while hospitals, health systems and our colleagues on the front lines teeter on the brink of collapse. The new and more contagious variant of the virus first reported in the United Kingdom is already spreading within the U.S.

But as physicians, there is much we can do—even if we are not treating actively caring for COVID-19 patients on the front lines.

We must continue to urge our patients to wear masks when around others they don’t live with, frequently wash their hands, and physically distance from others as much as possible. This will remain critical, even as more and more people receive the vaccine.

We can be public ambassadors for science and evidence, helping neutralize the spread of misinformation and disinformation online and over social media.

We can call upon our elected officials to affirm science, evidence and facts in their words and actions. We can insist that our government’s scientific institutions—including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Food and Drug Administration and others—are free from political pressure, and that their actions are guided by the best available scientific evidence. Politics simply have no place in a pandemic or a health crisis.

And we can be stewards for cooperation and collaboration, giving voice to the global community of medicine that suffered mightily in the last year. We were reminded last year that no country exists in isolation when faced with a crippling pandemic.

We must call upon our elected leaders to recognize the global community of health providers and health care institutions which are so critical in helping mitigate future threats before they sweep our planet. The AMA applauds the incoming administration’s commitment to rejoin the World Health Organization and we are eager to help shape policy to prevent the next pandemic from such widespread devastation.

We won’t get through the remaining months of this pandemic by wishing it were over. We must move forward in the new year with a newfound spirit of unity, cooperation and purpose. And it must start at the very top.