

Dr. Madara: AMA's trusted voice marshaled to advance health equity

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Even in the darkest days of the COVID-19 pandemic, physicians were a source of light. Highlighting the extraordinary work that took place over the past year, AMA Executive Vice President and CEO James L. Madara, MD, spoke of the role “a more nimble, focused” AMA played in supporting physicians during a once-in-a-generation public health crisis and how that response can be channeled to advance health equity.

“Time and again, through hardship and setbacks, through surges and lockdowns, against a rising tide of anti-science rhetoric and political grandstanding, physicians rose to the extraordinary challenge of COVID-19,” Dr. Madara said in a virtual address to the AMA House of Delegates (HOD) at the June 2021 AMA Special Meeting. “Physicians stood tall. And the AMA stood with them.”

A powerful, trusted voice

With AMA dues-paying membership growing by 35% over the past 10 years, the Association's voice is strong, Dr. Madara said. He attributed that increase to the success of the AMA's work in three strategic areas: removing obstacles to patient care, driving the future of medicine through improved education, and leading the charge to prevent chronic disease.

“This is the work the AMA does day in and day out, even in a pandemic—to improve both the clinical environment and patient outcomes, to build practice sustainability and to elevate the concerns of our physician community to those who can lend a hand,” he said. “These aren't easy lifts. Rather, these involve big, seismic changes to health care that the AMA confronts. And physicians, by placing their trust and support in us, see the AMA as their powerful ally in patient care.”

That is evidenced by the increasing role the AMA has played as patients, physicians and

policymakers sought answers to critical questions during the pandemic. Looking at share of voice—a standard measure of an organization’s reach and media exposure—the AMA was the leading nonpartisan voice among health care associations in 2020.

“If a worried parent, business owner or caregiver turned on the news, or read an article, or scrolled through their social media feeds in order to better understand this novel virus, that person was more likely to hear from the AMA than from any other health or public health association,” Dr. Madara said.

With a strong and trusted voice, the AMA is well positioned to use its position to advance health equity. Released last month, the AMA’s “Organizational Strategic Plan to Embed Racial Justice and Advance Health Equity: 2021–2023” is rooted in policy adopted by delegates.

“The AMA is neither first nor alone in dealing with health equity as a core strategic element,” Dr. Madara said. “Many organizations have worked against inequities and injustices in health care for decades, and the AMA has voiced concerns in these areas as well. But now we are intentional and deeply committed to this work. It is part of our core framework.”

The plan has been years in the making, formed through the work of the AMA Center for Health Equity . The AMA’s health equity plan includes five strategies needed to move toward a more equitable future for health care:

- | Embedding equity and racial justice throughout the AMA by developing anti-racism and equity practices, programming, policies and culture.
- | Building alliances with historically marginalized physicians and other stakeholders.
- | Pushing upstream to address determinants of health and understand the root causes of inequities.
- | Ensuring that equitable structures and opportunities in innovation are reflected in AMA’s efforts to advance digital health.
- | Fostering pathways for truth and reflection through honest conversations about AMA’s past to define and understand how our own policies and practices through history have contributed to the unequal health system that exists today.

“Our AMA envisions a nation in which all people live in thriving communities with a health system that values people equally and treats them equitably,” Dr. Madara said.

“We strive for all Americans to have access to meaningful and affordable health care,” he added. “But in the absence of equity, how can we possibly ensure optimization of access and quality? Through this plan we will develop and provide physicians the tools, resources and the understanding needed to identify and address inequities in their community of patients.”