Susan Bailey, MD, looks back at her AMA presidency

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In today’s COVID-19 Update, a discussion with the AMA’s outgoing president, Susan Bailey, MD, an allergist and immunologist in Fort Worth, Texas, who shares reflections and learnings from a presidency shaped by a global pandemic.

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Speaker

- Susan Bailey, MD, president, AMA

Transcript

Unger: Hello. This is the American Medical Association's COVID-19 Update. Today, we're having our final COVID-19 Update with Dr. Susan Bailey, AMA's outgoing president, an allergist and immunologist in Fort Worth, Texas, who will share her reflections and learnings from a presidency that's been shaped by a global pandemic. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer in Chicago.

Well, Dr. Bailey, first of all I cannot believe that it's been an entire year, and what an honor it's been to work with you. You stepped into this presidency during one of the most difficult times in the nation's history, and certainly one of the most challenging times for medicine.

You're leaving your presidency with our country in a much better place than it was a year ago. Looking back, what would you say is your biggest learning from the past year?
Dr. Bailey: Oh wow, Todd. I also cannot believe it's been a year, and thank you for all of the COVID-19 updates that you've done in the last year. It's just a phenomenal body of work and, gosh, what we've learned. We have learned so much.

I think overall one of the lessons that I'm taking away is that our profession and our society is capable of rapid transformational change if we want to, just things like adopting telemedicine almost overnight. But that only happened because years of groundwork had been done by the AMA with CMS and others to make sure that everything was ready.

Another thing we learned is that if payers really wanted to pay us overnight they could. When one of the stimulus bills featured automatic payments for physicians who took straight Medicare as a percent of past receipts, we literally had money in our bank accounts the next morning, so don't ever let anybody tell you that it takes a long time to get paid because it doesn't anymore.

I learned about myself that I can get a lot more done if I don't have to travel and I think that's true for everybody. We value those relationships. We treasure seeing our friends, but the fact of the matter is that travel takes a lot of time and we can all be a lot more efficient and get a lot more done during the day if we're not sitting in traffic or waiting in airports.

Unger: Well, I know exactly how you feel. Dr. Bailey, I wanted to share one thing I've learned over the past year working with you, is just how valuable it is to create that direct connection between physicians and key players in health care, especially through your conversations with Dr. Marks and other folks in the CDC.

What a valuable connection that you were able to create in the honest conversations between ... the direct conversations. Do you have any thoughts on that that you wanted to share?

Dr. Bailey: Those webinars with the FDA and the CDC, first of all they were a lot of fun for me to do, and I think that they were incredibly valuable. We typically had a thousand viewers live every time we had one of those webinars, and many more people saw them afterwards.

But I think it really not only helped cement our good relationship with the FDA and the CDC and the HHS, knowing that we were there to be partners, we were there to help get the job done, to get communications out to physicians. But I think it also just cemented with them, and with the public, is that the AMA is the place to go. The AMA is who you need to talk to. The AMA is who you need to work with to get good medical and science education disseminated, of how you reach physicians. You go to the AMA.

So I think that those conversations with Dr. Marks and all of his colleagues not only ... you know, obviously, I think making a big difference in the development of vaccines and the success that vaccines have been, but also just letting everybody know that the AMA is really who you need to talk
to when you want to get something done.

**Unger:** Well said. What do you think, looking back over this past year, has been the biggest challenge for you personally?

**Dr. Bailey:** Oh boy. I think it was that travel thing. I think the biggest challenge was ... the job of the AMA president is to be the spokesperson for the organization, not only to the profession but to the public and to policy makers, and doing that without stepping foot in DFW airport was a big challenge.

Fortunately, I had a lot of media experience. I learned a lot when I was president of the Texas Medical Association, during the adoption of the ACA, so I got a lot of experience then. It's just to be able to forge new relationships without meeting them in person, being able not only to share messages, but to make connections. So that was a challenge. It was a doable challenge. We were really able to get a lot done and I was able to meet a lot of new people, develop new relationships.

I was really amazed at how quickly medicine adapted to functioning in a virtual world, whether it was seeing patients or even debating health policy. I think we learned that these virtual platforms are going to be a valuable part of our work going forward.

**Unger:** I remember a year ago, you were just setting up your telemedicine in your practice, learning along kind of with the rest of physicians out there about how to get that up and running, and that it's not just a technology issue. It is a pretty complex issue that runs the gamut.

There was one other thing I remember you talking about right when you started your presidency, and it was kind of your personal mission, to let doctors be doctors. Now that you think back over the course of this year and everything that the pandemic threw at us, do you feel like you were able to kind of accomplish that goal?

**Dr. Bailey:** I think we made some real progress probably despite the pandemic and also because of the pandemic. One thing I still feel like we made some progress, to let doctors be doctors you have to make sure that you're not making them be something else. You're not making them be data entry clerks. You're not making them be prior authorization machines. You're not making them be number crunchers and box checkers in order to just get paid, to not be bouncers at the exam room door to keep government and insurers out of the patient/physician relationship, but to let us do our job.

And the public saw us do our job. At the very worst of the pandemic, they saw us at our best. They realized what heroes doctors really are, so I believe we made some conceptual and theoretical progress along those lines.

But then when you look at the things that we were able to get done in Congress that really didn't have anything to do with the pandemic, the surprise billing progress that we made, the E&M coding changes that took effect at the first of the year, which I think will eventually take a great burden off of
doctors. So I really do think that we made some concrete progress in giving doctors more time to do what they love and what they do best, which is take care of their patients.

**Unger:** A great mission. This pandemic and the past year and a half has been a time of profound loss, but also profound achievement and innovation in medicine. What are your thoughts about the advancements we've seen emerge from this crisis, and what does it mean for medicine going forward?

**Dr. Bailey:** In the past year we have been witness to and were part of I think one of the greatest scientific achievements in history, the development of mRNA vaccines, our ability to treat this new disease which was nothing like any of us had ever seen before and was so incredibly lethal.

The progress that we've made in the past year is just simply astounding. We've learned so much about critical care medicine. We've learned about this new disease. It's taught us many new things that we'll be able to apply to other disease states. We've learned a lot about hospital medicine. We've learned about, unfortunately, the frailties of our public health system that we've got a lot of work to do on.

But going forward, between the strides in telemedicine that we've made, the realizations that we've made about the importance of inequities in health care and in society, I think those genies are out of the bottle, I hope, and that we now know the work that we have to do going forward to be successful.

**Unger:** I think you also mentioned back earlier in this conversation the speed with which these things can be done. Maybe that is just a whole different change of perspective that I hope we can see continue.

**Dr. Bailey:** Yes, if we want to. If we want to.

**Unger:** Another thing you talked about when you began your presidency was the idea of a hero's journey that physicians have to travel to become physicians in the first place, and the pandemic really put a spotlight on physician heroism and even inspired a lot of folks to pursue a career in medicine that wouldn't have considered it before.

What do you hope students and residents who are just entering medicine can take away from all of this?

**Dr. Bailey:** I think that the pandemic has show the phenomenal resiliency of the physician community and of the medical community really at large. It just gives me goosebumps to think that we have record numbers of young women and me applying to medical school to become physicians despite everything that's gone on in the past year, and because of everything that's gone on in the past year.

The very best of medicine has been revealed, and I think everyone realizes now what an incredible honor it is to take care of someone else's health. Part of the job of the hero, if you will, is to honor and
emulate those who came before and realize that we are laying the groundwork for those that come after us.

So our new students will be the legacy of this pandemic. They will be the legacy of this moment. It's really the most valuable gift to medicine we could possibly have.

**Unger:** As we start to think about re-establishing at least some sense of normalcy coming out of this post pandemic, where do you see the greatest opportunities for the AMA and yourself as a leader in medicine?

**Dr. Bailey:** Well, like I mentioned, we now know a lot of the work that has to be done, particularly in the areas of health equity, which the cracks in our ability to take care of all communities in this country has really been laid bare and a spotlight has been shown on people that really just have not been given the medical care that they needed.

But I think this is also incumbent upon us as an organization, the AMA and all other medical organizations out there in the Federation, that we need to be very intentional in involving people, in recruiting new leadership. And making sure that there are plenty of women, that there are plenty of minorities, that there are plenty of people from all walks of the medical life that are in leadership of the AMA, and that we can't do a good job representing to profession without a very diverse leadership.

I think another great opportunity that we have is to really cement the AMA's position as the trusted agent in medicine, who everyone turns to when they need help, whether it be policy makers, whether it be patients, whether it be regulators, whether it be scientists, whether it be the media and especially our patients, is that the AMA can be trusted to tell the truth, to respect science, to look at the data and the evidence, and as my predecessor, Dr. Patrice Harris, said to speak truth to power.

Organized medicine is so incredibly important because it takes a big group of folks to get big things done. Organized medicine can accomplish things that individual physicians just cannot accomplish on their own.

**Unger:** My last question, I wanted to repeat something you said when we talked at the start of your presidency. I asked you at the time what gave you hope, and your answer was, "We will see the end of this pandemic. We just have to stick together, and I'm hopeful that out of this darkness we can bring forth an American health care system that's healthier than ever."

A year later a lot's changed. What do those words mean to you now and how do you feel about that?

**Dr. Bailey:** They mean more than ever because we are seeing the end of this pandemic. We have seen the development and the implementation and delivery of incredible vaccines. We've seen the case numbers plummet. We've seen us being able to now start sharing our vaccine resources with other countries, because we don't live in a vacuum. It is a global community, and everyone around the
world needs to be immunized.

But we now know the work that needs to be done. We've made progress on administrative and regulatory burdens for physicians, but we know we have more work to do. But it's really exhilarating to think that we've gotten to this point and be excited about the work that we've got to do in the future.

Unger: It is exciting. We've been through a lot and achieved a lot, and I just want to say thank you to you, Dr. Bailey, for all your leadership and guidance throughout this year. We know that you're going to continue to be a strong voice for the AMA and this nation's physicians.

Also, this marks almost our 300th COVID-19 Update. That's exciting news, because we're going to be transitioning to a new series called AMA Moving Medicine, which will be both in video and podcast form, to amplify physician voices and highlight developments and achievements throughout medicine.

Our first Moving Medicine episode is going to take place tomorrow, featuring an interview with the AMA's incoming president, Dr. Gerald Harmon. We hope you'll continue to join us for the COVID updates and also subscribe to our Moving Medicine videos and podcasts at ama-assn.org. Check that out for more information.

Unger: Dr. Bailey, again thank you for everything. It's been an honor.

Dr. Bailey: Thank you Todd.

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