In his first remarks after assuming one of medicine’s most impactful posts, Gerald E. Harmon, MD, channeled his 35-year military career in assessing the road ahead.

“This is a consequential time in American history, and in the history of medicine,” Dr. Harmon said in his inaugural address before a virtual gathering of the AMA House of Delegates at the June 2021 AMA Special Meeting. “We, too, are at war against seemingly formidable adversaries: the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to the deaths of millions worldwide, and hundreds of thousands here at home, prolonged isolation and its effects on emotional and behavioral health, political and racial tension, and the immense battle to rid our health system—and society—of health disparities and racism.”

COVID-19’s toll and health inequity

For physicians, the past 15 months have been physically and mentally exhausting. Dr. Harmon—a family medicine physician from Pawleys Island, South Carolina, who retired from the military as a major general—spoke of endless shifts, heart-wrenching conversations and devastating outcomes. On a larger scale, the pandemic laid bare so many flaws in the nation’s system of care, including the profound inequities within it.

“The COVID pandemic has revealed enormous gaps in how we care for people and communities in America, demonstrated in the disproportionate impact of this pandemic on communities of color and in the weaknesses of our underfunded and under-resourced public health infrastructure,” Dr. Harmon said.

“During such times of struggle and heartbreak, it is important for us to remember our why. Why did we enter medicine? Why do we continue to struggle against overwhelming administrative and regulatory
burdens? Why are we risking our health and our families during this global pandemic? I would submit that the education, the training, the years of experience and sacrifice we have gone through has prepared us for such a time as this.”

Weeks ago, the AMA released its organizational plan to create a more equitable system of care. That plan begins with understanding, Dr. Harmon said. He spoke of a recent interaction with an older Black patient that wasn’t going well. He turned the tide by asking the patient about his life—not his illness. The level of care, Dr. Harmon said, was improved by treating the whole patient, not just the disease.

That type of understanding must be applied more broadly.

“Meaningful progress won’t happen until we, as doctors, recognize how profoundly systemic racism influences the health of our patients, and until we commit to taking action within our own sphere of influence,” Dr. Harmon said.

Momentum of the moment

The year ahead presents many challenges for physicians. Dr. Harmon spoke of the road ahead for a nation recovering from COVID and address those problems that were exacerbated by the pandemic, such as illicit drug overdoses and chronic disease prevention and management. And issues such as removing barriers to care and maximizing technology continue to persist, demanding policy changes and practical fixes.

Physicians—even after a harrowing, heroic year—are positioned and energized to embrace these challenges. Dr. Harmon cited as reasons for optimism the findings of a recent AMA survey, which found that many physicians have discovered an enhanced sense of meaning and purpose while working during COVID.

“Americans realize how much they rely on their own personal doctors and other health care workers on the front lines, how much they depend on the researchers and scientists to develop treatments and vaccines, the medical educators and teachers who mentor and train the vital physician workforce, and other physicians in nonclinical jobs who deliver crucial health-care resources in an emergency.”

Channeling the words of physician and Maj. Gen. Joseph Warren—who was killed in combat at the Battle of Bunker Hill—Dr. Harmon called on doctors to “act worthy of ourselves.” And the desired audience need not be in the highest positions of organized medicine to heed that call.

“We do not have to be on the AMA board or elected to a position to lead. We lead just by being doctors every day in every category: researcher, administrator, regulator, teacher, bedside clinician, advocate,” he said. “The AMA can meet the health care challenges of this moment because our
members are physicians acting worthy of themselves every day, in every venue. And in the process, we are moving medicine forward and positively affecting the lives of generations yet unborn.”