

Momentous year as AMA president leaves Dr. Bailey hopeful for future

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Len Strazewski

Contributing News Writer

The COVID-19 pandemic rocked the world, but in the past year the U.S medical community responded heroically, according to Susan R. Bailey, MD, whose term as AMA president ended earlier this month. And the AMA was on the forefront of spreading the news and the techniques that helped eventually bring the pandemic under control.

Dr. Bailey, an allergist and immunologist in Fort Worth, Texas, discussed the challenges of the past year in a recent episode of “AMA COVID-19 Update.” Despite the global trauma of the pandemic, medical breakthroughs have helped the United States respond to the virus and helped get the disease under better control in this country, she said.

“In the past year, we have been witness to and were part of one of the greatest scientific achievements in history, the development of mRNA vaccines,” said Dr. Bailey, now the AMA’s immediate past president. The new method enhanced the ability to treat the new disease, “which was nothing like any of us had ever seen before.”

“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,” she said. The pandemic, meanwhile, “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,” she said.

Equity becomes a clearer priority

Dr. Bailey noted that despite progress in telemedicine and other steps taken to improve communication with patients, she recognizes more about inequities in health care and in society, and what the AMA and physicians need to do in the future.

“Those genies are out of the bottle, and that we now know the work that we have to do going forward to be successful,” she said.

Dr. Bailey said that one of her most important lessons of the past year was about the U.S. health care system’s ability to respond to challenges with rapid change—if the groundwork is laid correctly with agencies such as the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS).

“Our profession and our society are capable of rapid transformational change if we want to—just things like adopting telemedicine almost overnight,” she noted. “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.”

Even the economics of medicine can change quickly, she said.

“We learned 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,” Dr. Bailey said. “So don't ever let anybody tell you that it takes a long time to get paid because it doesn't anymore.”

Overall, the response to the pandemic was inspirational, creating a new wave of interest in medical professions and applications to medical school, she said.

“The pandemic has shown the phenomenal resiliency of the physician community and of the medical community at large,” she said. “It just gives me goosebumps to think that we have record numbers of young women and men 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.”

Get the latest news on the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccines, variants and more reliable information directly from experts and physician leaders with the “AMA COVID-19 Update.”

You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version.