Q&A: New AMA president wants to go on offense against COVID-19

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Last month, Gerald E. Harmon, MD, became the 176th person to hold the office of AMA president, one of medicine’s most impactful posts. As the country continues to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Harmon is committed to improving vaccination rates and access to care.

A family physician in his coastal South Carolina hometown of Georgetown, Dr. Harmon has been an AMA Board of Trustees member since 2013, serving as board chair from 2017 to 2018. Prior to his election to the AMA board, Dr. Harmon served on the AMA Council on Medical Service. Additionally, Dr. Harmon has held several leadership positions with the South Carolina Medical Association, including chair of the board of trustees and president.

Dr. Harmon recently took time to discuss how his 35-year military career has helped him in assessing the road ahead as the AMA’s new president and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
Gerald E. Harmon, MD

AMA: First off, congratulations on your new role. How does it feel to be president of the AMA?

Dr. Harmon: I am excited about the opportunity. I really am humbled and if my service allows me to be helpful, I appreciate it. But I'm more excited about the opportunity to make a difference than about any fame or fortune.

AMA: How have your leadership positions prepared you for this role as the new AMA president?

Dr. Harmon: It absolutely is necessary or best if one gets to do that. It's not a requirement, but it does give you background. And while it doesn't give you, necessarily, intellect or even wisdom, it gives you the benefit of experience. And that's been helpful in gaining experience on the AMA Board of Trustees—learning how the processes work, learning how one gets discussions going, and how one listens to the senior management plans and how to interact with a great leadership team.

The challenge of any leader is perspective, experience and, at the same time, guidance. We're elected to positions of leadership because someone trusts us to guide us in the right direction. As a member of first, the Board of Trustees, then of the executive committee and the officers—secretary, chair-elect, chair and now president-elect and president, I've been able to garner four or five years of experience in my eight years.

For two years, I probably didn't say much and exercised that introvert capacity. I sat and listened. Whatever board I'm on, whatever organization, I'm very interested in the person who's pensive and takes things in before offering perspective and opinions, and certainly before offering direction.

AMA: Similarly, has your 35-year experience in the military—achieving the rank of major general in the Air Force—also prepared you for this new role?

Dr. Harmon: Absolutely. Most people who join the military don't join it with the idea that they're going to be a general, admiral or a senior leader. They joined it hopefully with an open mind that they're challenged. I came from rather humble beginnings, and I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but I was blessed with talent, and I had a moderate amount of intellect, so I could handle most challenges. I also had a very supportive family—I was raised by a single mom because my father, unfortunately, at a young age had a fatal illness, but I looked at the military as a form of service.

My father had been in the military. I was enamored by the structure of the military—it gave you a sense of purpose and a larger family stability. When my dad had worked in cotton mills, we moved around and then when he passed away, it left me to look for role models. In high school, for example, I made very good test scores and got recognized at the state level. The state-level administrators said, “Mr. Harmon, you need to name your favorite teacher who’s taught you to make these good test scores.”
scores.” And I looked around and I said, “You know, my favorite teacher and role model is my football coach.”

They said, “Well, you can't have a football coach. This is about being a successful student.”

And I said, “No, my football coach has taught me a lot. He's taught me how to practice, how to get better. He's taught me to always remember what my role is and remember my duty to not let my teammates down. He told me that even after the football program is over, to remember who I represented. You're always going to represent your background. You're going to represent your jersey.”

And I say that now—whether the jersey says South Carolina, U.S. military, U.S. Air Force or the AMA, I represent them. Fifty years of knowledge and 50 years of advice I still live by to this day.

AMA: What is at the top of your agenda during your presidency?

Dr. Harmon: When I got on the board eight years ago, we talked about three strategic arcs of improving health outcomes, changing medical education, and the sustainability of medical practice—with physician satisfaction. Those arcs continue to be removing barriers, educating the workforce and improving health outcomes, and they are accelerated by health equity, innovation and advocacy.

I told James L. Madara, MD, and the trustee leadership, that these are really pretty high goals. And Dr. Madara said these are moonshots, but I thought they were more than that—they were out of the solar system.

Moonshots have happened, but they were talking about a mission to Mars or Saturn with these things, and it's not going to happen in the next decade or two. Eight years later, we're seeing some of them, but the job isn't done. If I can be an accelerator for our accelerants and our strategic arcs—let’s go for it!

AMA: As we continue to navigate the pandemic and more people get vaccinated, what will the focus be?

Dr. Harmon: We have to still look at the current stage of the COVID pandemic response. We need to look at what our next steps forward are. One of ours is to become more on the offense. The vaccines allow us to go on offense and take a preventive action against spreading the virus without just changing the way we do business, without masking up, without closing businesses, without closing schools, without changing the entire educational process, without limiting access to health care … and things like that in a fearful reaction to the COVID pandemic.

Instead, we can vaccinate folks. We can vaccinate health care providers. We can vaccinate the
vulnerable patients, even the nonvulnerable—but the potential carriers. If we can limit the transmissibility of the virus, we can take an offensive position. Looking at our AMA strategic plan, though, what we're talking about is reestablishing access to care. And that's what we're trying to do now. We're trying to remove barriers and obstacles. One of the obstacles is the COVID pandemic restrictions.

Reestablishing access to care helps us on a couple of other strategic arcs. It allows us to improve health outcomes. We get that preventive care, and patients can get to their doctor and be screened or treated for their chronic diseases—whether it's cardiovascular disease like high blood pressure, heart trouble or diabetes—which we've had strategic efforts in. This is a logistical challenge for us to open up practices again and get patients back in with confidence.

AMA: We've also seen the mental health toll of the pandemic on doctors. How can the AMA help improve physician well-being?

Dr. Harmon: Behavioral health is not only among the public and the patients. We've seen all that because of the lack of social interaction, the frustration, the threat to your personal family, to your health and everything else. But doctors have had incredible economic pressures. They've not been able to see patients. they've had their practices closed. They've used the Paycheck Protection Program [PPP] loans. We've worked well within the AMA to advocate for practice loans, PPP loans, the CARES Act and things like that have been made available to practicing physicians. A lot of these things barely maintain the doors being open, which is one of the best ways to improve health outcomes—having access to doctors and medical care. So it's not just about keeping the doctors in practice, but in a positive emotional state. Even the folks who are in research and industry have been worried about it because a lot of things were placed on hold. Advancements were sometimes put aside in order to deliver the more urgent care when COVID consumed all our resources.

Then we had to worry about going into a health care environment where we could get sick—that enemy could bite back as I see it. You had to remember that COVID had some teeth to it, so it can get you in some trouble. We had to worry about having a fresh gown, mask and goggles to wear. We also had to worry about if we had an N95 that fits.

The pandemic has taken an emotional toll on doctors, but we have also seen some literature that shows that as many as 48% of doctors have actually found a renewal of purpose. Now the public has realized that these doctors are heroes. It's not just the military or law enforcement who are the front-line workers. It's the health care workers too—we're risking our lives and fighting this environment. But we felt recognized.

There's a renewal of purpose. We've got to remember why we went into medicine and took an oath to
serve humanity.