Susan Bailey, MD, on mandating vaccines for health care workers

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Featured topic and speakers

In today’s COVID-19 Update, a discussion with the AMA’s immediate past president, Dr. Susan Bailey, about a statement released earlier this week by nearly 60 major medical organizations, including the AMA, in support of COVID-19 vaccine mandates for all health care and long-term care workers.

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Speaker

Susan R. Bailey, MD, immediate past president, AMA

Transcript

Unger: Hello. This is the American Medical Association’s COVID-19 Update. Today I'm joined by the AMA’s immediate past president, Dr. Susan Bailey, an allergist and immunologist in Fort Worth, Texas, to discuss a statement released earlier this week by nearly 60 major medical organizations, including the AMA, in support of COVID-19 vaccine mandates for all health care workers and long-term care workers. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer in Chicago.

Dr. Bailey, there's been a lot of talk this past week about vaccine mandates and this announcement is specific to health care workers. I'd love it if you could just start by talking about why the AMA felt it was important to take this step.

Dr. Bailey: We have seen an incredible uptick in the number of cases and hospitalizations because of the Delta variant to COVID-19 and vaccination rates have really slowed down since they peaked in
the spring. And we felt it was time to make that extra push and to go ahead and call for mandates for health care workers and for long-term care workers. There’s lots of precedent for this, health care workers are used to being required to have influenza vaccines, pertussis vaccines, hepatitis B vaccines, to be screened for tuberculosis every year, so this is really not that unusual a requirement for health care workers. It’s so important to keep our health care and long-term care workforce safe but it’s ultimately about patient safety and stopping the spread of the disease.

**Unger:** Well, this statement was noteworthy not only because of what it says but also because nearly 60 health care organizations signed it. Let's talk about the significance of that. Is that unusual for this many health care organizations to come together around an issue like this?

**Dr. Bailey:** It is a very broad ranging coalition of health care organizations and it is somewhat unusual to be able to pull something like that together so quickly but I think it’s because there is such strong feeling in the health care community about the importance of being vaccinated and signaling our readiness for these mandates. We’ve worked with other medical organizations, other health care organizations, throughout the pandemic but never a coalition quite this big.

**Unger:** Well, Dr. Bailey, a couple of weeks ago, we had Dr. Audiey Kao, who is the VP of our ethics team here at the AMA, talking about ethical considerations for the mandates as opposed to the legal side of things. I'd love to hear from you about your perspective on the ethics of vaccine mandates.

**Dr. Bailey:** The AMA Code of Medical Ethics has long held that we should put patients first and part of doing that during a pandemic of communicable diseases that physicians need to be immunized for those diseases in order to protect their patients. The statement that we issued itself reads, "This is the logical fulfillment of the ethical commitment of all health care workers to put patients as well as residents of long-term care facilities first and take all steps necessary to ensure their health and well-being." This is important not only to stop the spread of disease but to give extra protection to those who can't be vaccinated yet, that is the immunocompromised and children who don't qualify for the vaccine yet. We believe that putting patients first is really the bedrock ethic here that we are following.

**Unger:** That's very clear in that statement. There are some questions about the EUA, that the vaccines are authorized under Emergency Use Authorizations and a question about whether or not they should be mandated before the full approval by the FDA. Can you talk to that issue?
Dr. Bailey: Well, in a perfect world we’d be able to do that but in a pandemic setting with the disease increasing so quickly we believe that it is acceptable to mandate vaccines, even under an EUA. But remember, the EUA that is for vaccines is incredibly close to the actual requirements for the Biologics License Authorization. So we feel that the science has been done, no corners have been cut, these vaccines are incredibly safe and effective. Hundreds of millions of them have been given in what is really the largest clinical study ever done and so we believe that it’s really not necessary to wait for what really amounts to an administrative bureaucratic procedure to finish the paperwork in order to turn this pandemic around and get back under control.

Unger: Well, Dr. Bailey, how do you hope a statement like this will impact our vaccination efforts overall in the short term and the long term?

Dr. Bailey: Our hope is that it will increase vaccination rates again. And since the statement has been issued, we have seen a dramatic uptick in the number of health care organizations, long-term care facilities and really non-health related businesses, establish employee mandates for vaccination. So I’m hopeful that this is a trend that we are seeing to have more universal vaccination across our population so we can get ahead of the Delta variant and get this pandemic behind us.

Unger: Well, you made vaccine information and addressing misinformation a big part of your presidency, and you’re continuing your discussions around vaccinations, how and can we address the importance of this continuing vaccine education?

Dr. Bailey: There are still so many folks out there who really haven’t heard the message yet, that these vaccines are safe, that they’re effective and that they need to be given to everyone. In fact, I saw two patients just this morning whose mothers, young mothers, had not been vaccinated yet and it was obvious that it just hadn’t occurred to them. They’re so busy with their kids that they hadn’t really thought about themselves in terms of being vaccinated and so I was able to have those discussions with them and hopefully get them thinking that yes, it’s important for them too even though they’re young and healthy because now that’s what we’re seeing in our hospitals is young and previously healthy individuals. The message has to be consistent but it can be delivered in many different ways, by many different people. And once again, we still are asking everyone, if you have questions, ask your doctor.

Unger: It sounds like those folks have important people depending on them. And as we’ve heard from doctors across the country, it’s too late if you’re in the ICU to get that vaccine. It’s time to get it now.
Dr. Bailey, thanks again for joining us and for your perspective on this vaccine mandate, very, very important statement from the AMA and 59 other organizations about this issue. That concludes today’s COVID-19 Update. Dr. Bailey, we’ll see you soon for another discussion in the future. For more information on COVID-19, visit ama-assn.org/COVID-19. Thanks for joining us. Please take care.

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