AMA president urges patients and physicians to reengage

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Lockdowns and social distancing efforts were essential to controlling the COVID-19 pandemic, but they also caused more than one-third of U.S. adults to delay or forgo recommended medical appointments. As life takes steps to return to normal, it’s urgent that patients and physicians prioritize health screenings and regular procedures.

That’s the message AMA President Gerald E. Harmon, MD, delivered in a recent commentary in the Post and Courier of Charleston, South Carolina. A family physician who has practiced in coastal South Carolina for more than 30 years, Dr. Harmon has been a member of the AMA Board of Trustees since 2013 and was inaugurated as 176th president of the AMA in June.

Some effects were immediate

“Preventive cancer screenings are designed to catch cancer early to keep people healthy but have dropped precipitously since the pandemic’s start: They’re more than 30% lower than pre-COVID-19 levels,” Dr. Harmon wrote, adding that while screenings have rebounded somewhat, it’s already too late for some patients.

“The death rates for breast, colorectal and lung cancer were all increased in the first wave of the pandemic, with the National Cancer Institute projecting 10,000 excess deaths over the next year due to breast and colorectal cancers alone,” he noted.

Meanwhile, about four in 10 adults with one or more chronic health conditions have reported delaying care or skipping it altogether since the pandemic started, and a third of these have said doing so either worsened one or more of their conditions or limited their ability to work or perform other daily activities.

The AMA has several online tools and resources to help physicians prevent and manage chronic
diseases. AMA MAP BP™ is an evidence-based quality improvement program that provides a clear path to significant, sustained improvements in blood pressure (BP) control. Target: BP™, a national initiative co-led by the AMA and American Heart Association, helps health care organizations and care teams, at no cost, improve BP control rates through evidence-based protocols based on the AMA MAP BP framework. Meanwhile, the AMA’s Diabetes Prevention Guide helps practices identify people with prediabetes and manage the risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

Mental health is suffering

“Also troubling is the drop in screenings and routine care for mental health,” Dr. Harmon wrote. “Compounded with the mental health toll of the pandemic, more people are experiencing more depression and anxiety.”

In fact, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 40% of U.S. adults struggled with mental health or substance abuse because of the stress of the pandemic. To add to that, the World Health Organization has said bereavement, isolation, loss of income and fear tied to the pandemic have triggered mental health conditions or exacerbated existing ones.

Health equity took a hit too

“The delayed return to doctors also has highlighted socioeconomic and racial health disparities,” Dr. Harmon wrote, noting that Black adults were more likely than their White or Hispanic/Latinx counterparts to report having delayed or forgone care—and having delayed or forgone multiple types of care—due to the pandemic.

“Disparities in the prevalence of hypertension, obesity, mental health and other chronic conditions also can continue to worsen if these communities put off care at a disproportionate rate,” he wrote.

Back to school = back to the doctor

With the new school year about to start, now is a great time to reengage with students. Also, with winter right around the corner, it’s opportune to connect with everyone who needs a flu shot.

Doctors should expect many patients to be behind on their vaccinations. From March to May of last year, it’s estimated that some 260,000 scheduled immunizations were either missed or delayed, and over the course of the calendar year, the numbers were even worse: About 26 million recommended
vaccinations were missed in 2020 compared with 2019.

“Everyone should check with their health care provider to see if it’s time to schedule a screening and make an appointment,” Dr. Harmon urged. “Doctors’ offices are open and ready to help you stay healthy. Please do not delay: Schedule your doctors’ visits now.”

Read more about why now is the time to schedule that check-up for screening.