AMA president: Physicians are leading “an army against the virus”

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A former career officer in the US Air Force and the Air National Guard, Gerald E. Harmon, MD, recognized the strained looks he saw in the hospital, working with young physicians and residents as COVID-19 ravaged his community hospital in Georgetown County, South Carolina, this past summer.

“The fear and weariness in young clinicians’ faces was not unlike what I witnessed in the medical arena in Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom after 9/11—I’d call it battle fatigue,” said Dr. Harmon, the AMA’s 176th president, in a speech during the opening session of the AMA House of Delegates at the November 2021 AMA Special Meeting.

“Like combat, the unrelenting demands of responding to COVID patients has led to physical and emotional exhaustion and pushed physicians and our entire health care workforce to the breaking point,” he said.

Read the speech.

Strength in numbers

It is organized medicine that will guide physicians through the turmoil of a pandemic that has already claimed the lives of more than 750,000 Americans, Dr. Harmon said.
“Throughout this pandemic, the AMA and our state and specialty medical associations have stepped up and bridged many gaps, getting doctors and other health care workers the information, PPE and other resources they needed, even as state and federal governments struggled in a deficient public health system,” Dr. Harmon said.

“When I use the term organized medicine, I don’t mean an abstract concept. I mean our people, our common purpose and our actions in support of a profession built on ethics and science, and that is focused on providing the best possible care for patients in ways that also strengthen our communities.”

Dr. Harmon cited specific contributions organized medicine has made in the fight against the pandemic, among them:

- Helping to obtain personal protective equipment (PPE) and financial resources.
- Providing reliable, evidence-based information on COVID-19 that physicians needed during a time of mixed messages.
- Working with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services to expand telehealth and pause regulations standing in the way or virtual patient care.
- Pushing insurers to drop prior-authorization requirements.
- Fighting against misinformation and disinformation related to the vaccine.

Dr. Harmon told of a recent interaction he had with a group of 50 employees who were hesitant about COVID-19 vaccination. He told the employee group that as a family physician he had been charged with helping them, or their families, with care to treat everything from sprains and aches to cancer. They had sought his advice for decades. Why would they stop now? The point, Dr. Harmon said, was an effective one.

“Afterwards, many of the vaccine-hesitant stepped up and thanked me and said I’d convinced them—when could they get the shot?” he said.

**Battling for patients and physicians**

There also are longstanding challenges in medicine that often predate the pandemic by generations.

Among the key battles he cited the AMA fighting:

- Medicare payment cuts of nearly 10% taking effect in a matter of months.
- Prior authorization and other “aggravating payer policies that hurt rather than help patients.”
Creating a health system that works for all patients.

“The impact of systemic racism in medicine—past and present—is real,” Dr. Harmon said. “The pandemic and social unrest of the past 20 months has shown all too clearly how policies such as segregation, mass incarceration, police brutality and redlining continue to adversely affect the health of Black and Brown individuals and communities.”

Dr. Harmon highlighted the work of the AMA’s strategic plan to embed equity and racial justice within the AMA and within the larger health care system, and noted that it is critical to the health of the nation.

Those lofty goals, Dr. Harmon pointed out, are not going to be accomplished by one physician but all doctors working together through the strong force of organized medicine.

The AMA and its Federation of Medicine “partners are strong. We are an army against the virus,” Dr. Harmon said. “We are an army against injustice. An army against unresponsive bureaucracy and distracted legislators. We are strong in support of our colleagues, individually and collectively. Strong in envisioning the end to this pandemic and a brighter age for health care.

“There will yet be uncertain times ahead, but we can walk with confidence into the future, because through organized medicine, we know we are not walking alone.”