

Surgeon general: 4 ways to prepare for the next pandemic

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While the COVID-19 pandemic has been a major human tragedy, it has also led to important scientific and technological breakthroughs, from the rapid-scale development of vaccines to the emergence—and frequent use—of telemedicine. We’ve also learned that health care can and needs to be better prepared for 21st century medicine and the next pandemic. But how can health care and government better prepare for the next pandemic?

“We can’t let this happen again—what we went through with COVID-19,” said U.S. Surgeon General Vice Adm. Vivek Murthy, MD, during a discussion with AMA Executive Vice President and CEO James L. Madara, MD, at the most recent American Conference on Physician Health, which was held in Scottsdale, Arizona Oct. 2021.

“We know other pathogens will come. We just have to be better equipped to address them without sustaining this loss of life and the other costs we’ve incurred,” said Dr. Murthy.

Invest more in public health

“When the great recession struck in 2008–2009, funding for public health departments was dramatically slashed,” said Dr. Murthy. “And when the economy recovered, many of those public health departments didn’t recover—they stayed in the low levels they had.”

As a result, “you have far too many public health departments that are working on the front lines of a pandemic without the equipment, the staffing and the training those staff deserve,” he said. “Yet we rely on these departments of public health for everything from contact tracing to help with testing and public education on vaccines at a local level.”

“America cannot afford to fund itself one crisis at a time. Public health doesn’t work that way,” said Dr. Murthy.

Add manufacturing capacity

There is the science of developing vaccines and therapeutics, which is important, “but there’s also then the manufacturing and distribution,” said Dr. Murthy. “And one of the things that we’ve seen is that we really need more manufacturing capacity to be able to rapidly increase our production in vaccines and therapeutics when they’re needed—not just for the United States, but for the world.

“And COVID has just been an incredibly poignant example of how our fate is deeply linked to what happens in other countries,” he added. “Which is why we have to lead and accelerate our work when it comes to helping vaccinate the world.”

Recognize that partnerships matter

“The federal government can’t solve this on its own. You can’t leave it up to states entirely to manage on their own,” said Dr. Murthy. “We have to have a really tight network between local, state and federal government, but also with health care institutions, with doctors, nurses and health professionals across the country.”

“The people who are most trusted are actually people’s doctors and nurses and health care professionals,” he said. “Yet without a strong partnership between government and practitioners on the ground, it’s hard to bring clinicians into that process to the extent that they need to be brought in in order to support them to the fullest extent that they need.”

“To battle the next pandemic, we will need our front-line clinicians not just to deliver care but to help communicate to the public,” Dr. Murthy said.

During this conversation with Dr. Madara, the surgeon general also spoke about why we must act together to address physician burnout.

Fight misinformation

“Social media companies have a moral obligation to make sure that their sites are not causing harm to people’s health,” said Dr. Murthy. “And one of the clearest ways we’re seeing that happen is through the rampant unchecked spread of health misinformation on these sites. That has got to change.”



Last summer, Dr. Murthy noted, his office issued an advisory “on the health risks of health misinformation, calling on not only technology companies, but other sectors to account for recognizing that companies have an extraordinarily important role to be able to step up and fight.”

Learn more with the AMA about why social media networks must crack down on medical misinformation.