As pandemic enters third year, take these 5 actions to move ahead

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Americans have felt physically and mentally wrung out by uncertainty, trauma, public health measures, economic difficulties and at least five distinct viral surges, said AMA President Gerald E. Harmon, MD, during an address to the National Press Club on the COVID-19 pandemic as it enters its third year.

These struggles are doubly difficult for physicians and the other health professionals who have been under siege since the start of the pandemic.

“Our nation is suffering a type of battle fatigue from our long fight with COVID, and the full impact of this pandemic on our national psyche may not be known until long after this difficult period ends,” Dr. Harmon said. “Every one of us is eager to bring this painful chapter to a close. But how we emerge from this pandemic—the lessons we learn and apply moving forward, the causes we fight for—will go a long way toward preventing the next great health crisis from gripping our country.”

In his address, Dr. Harmon outlined five ways to fix the ailing health system, rebuild trust and better respond to the next major public health emergency.

“We have come too far as a nation,” he said, “not to learn from the past two years.”

Enhance stockpiles of supplies

The shortage of personal protective equipment “and other essential supplies in the early months of this pandemic slowed our nation’s response and needlessly put lives of physicians and our front-line workers at risk,” said Dr. Harmon.

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Congress should work with federal agencies to build domestic manufacturing capacity by using public-private partnerships to accelerate production. There also needs to be a transparent plan to obtain and distribute needed supplies with clearly defined federal and state roles, as well as more funding and better planning for the Strategic National Stockpile.

Boost public health funding

“Chronic disinvestment in government public health agencies puts lives at risk and has severely limited our ability to fight COVID-19,” said Dr. Harmon, noting that “state public health spending has dropped 16% over the last decade.” These gaps “contributed to a lack of widespread testing, resulting in more rapid virus spread in the early stages of the pandemic,” he said. “And our inability to perform large-scale genetic sequencing allowed for dangerous new variants to spread, sometimes without detection.”

More funding’s needed “to increase staffing and upgrade essential functions, such as public health surveillance, which will make it easier to respond to emerging threats and better educate the public how best to protect themselves in a crisis,” said Dr. Harmon.

Learn how the AMA sets out to strengthen U.S. public health systems.

Warp Speed: Make it so—again

It’s also vital to “learn from the process that led to the rapid-scale development and production of several safe and highly effective vaccines,” Dr. Harmon said. “Operation Warp Speed is, quite simply, one of the greatest scientific achievements of our lifetime.

“The public-private partnership and operational structure of this plan should be preserved in some form for future pandemics, or any time vaccines and therapeutics are needed in such an emergency.”

Continue telehealth’s expansion

“Remote patient care has been a lifeline during this pandemic, not only for patients but for struggling physician practices,” said Dr. Harmon.

“For telehealth to succeed the way patients and physicians want it to, we need the help of Congress,”

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which should pass the Telehealth Modernization Act (PDF) that was recently included in the second Cures Act.

“For the rest of this pandemic and beyond, Medicare patients must retain the ability to access telehealth services from their doctors without arbitrary restrictions,” the AMA’s president added.

Consider pressure on physicians

“We must pause to consider the extraordinary pressure our nation’s physicians and health care workers have had to shoulder the last two years,” said Dr. Harmon. “They have worked extremely long hours, often for days at a time through every surge at great personal risks to themselves and their loved ones.”

“As a nation, we have begun to open our eyes to the mental health needs of physicians,” with Congress passing the Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act.

The law, Dr. Harmon said, will “dedicate federal resources to create evidenced-based programs to better support physicians and other health care workers.”