Supporting and recognizing our nation’s physicians with Susan Bailey, MD

AMA's Moving Medicine video series amplifies physician voices and highlights developments and achievements throughout medicine.

Featured topic and speakers

In recognition of both Doctors' Day and Women’s History Month, AMA Chief Experience Officer Todd Unger talks with AMA Immediate Past President Susan R. Bailey, MD, about the importance of supporting and recognizing our nation’s physicians today and every day.

Speaker

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

Transcript

Unger: Hello, this is the American Medical Association's Moving Medicine video and podcast. In recognition of both Doctors' Day and Women's History Month, today, I'm joined by the AMA's Immediate Past President Dr. Susan Bailey, an allergist and immunologist in Fort Worth, Texas, to discuss the importance of supporting and recognizing our nation's physicians today and every day. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer in Chicago. Dr. Bailey, happy Doctors' Day. And thanks for joining us today. People may not realize this but Doctors' Day has been celebrated since 1933. Why don't you start out by telling a little bit about the background of how this day came to be?

Dr. Bailey: Thanks, Todd. Doctors’ Day started in the early 20th century to celebrate the first delivery of anesthesia in the United States. And that happened on March 30 of 1842. Dr. Crawford Long in Jefferson, Georgia, did a successful anesthesia on a patient removing a mass from his neck. And in 1933, Ms. Eudora Brown Almond decided that, that needed to be the day that we celebrated doctors everywhere. It initially started as just writing a thank you card to your doctor or putting flowers on
deceased doctors' graves, including Dr. Long's grave, and has just grown from there.

**Unger:** I was reading about the invention of anesthesia, so to speak in Dr. Paul Offit's new book and that is not to be underestimated, the impact that that had on medicine. And I believe there were parades and statues erected because of that. Since then, obviously Doctors' Day has evolved. What is it now?

**Dr. Bailey:** Doctors' Day has become a day nationally where doctors are recognized and thanked. Many hospitals and health systems will acknowledge their physicians in some way, some with little gifts or some with a reception or something like that. But sometimes it's just a thank you. And to me that means as much as anything.

**Unger:** We're more than two years into this pandemic. Celebrating doctors feels especially important right now. Why is it critical to take time to recognize that all physicians and what they've been through and honor their contributions at this moment?

**Dr. Bailey:** Thanking doctors, acknowledging what doctors sacrifice to take care of their patients, I think is more important now than ever. We have been in this pandemic now for more than two years and it's not over yet. Doctors are tired, they're exhausted, they're frustrated. And even with the lowering of case numbers from the Omicron surge that we're seeing now, there's an awful lot of catch up work to do and a lot of pent up health care that wasn't delivered during the pandemic. So doctors are just as busy as ever. So we need that recognition now.

**Unger:** When I think back to the early days of the pandemic, I think some of those memories of people ringing bells and playing music and surrounding hospital entrances to thank physicians and health care teams for the work that they were doing in the midst of the pandemic. Those are forever going to be in my mind. It feels like a little bit that that kind of gratitude or sense of it is slowed down a little bit, even while the surges continue. How do we work to counter that?

**Dr. Bailey:** Well, it seems like a quaint moment, doesn't it? When this was happening two years ago and now doctors often feel like they've been made the enemy. We've been fighting a war on two fronts, fighting the virus and fighting misinformation about the virus and about vaccines at the same time. And it has jeopardized many patient-physician relationships. I can tell you firsthand that it's so disheartening to have a patient that you've known for years, you think you've built up a great amount of trust and that they really count on your advice. When you bring up COVID vaccines they say, "No, I've done my research and I'm not going to get one." And it makes me think, what do you think I've been working on all these years? It's really drives a wedge and takes a lot of professionalism to be able to carry on. And the misinformation, the demonization of physicians, especially public health physicians, I think is just tragic because it only multiplies the stress and the burdens that doctors carry in fighting the pandemic.
Unger: I mean, that has to be so disheartening and in so many fronts, whether it is promoting vaccines, like you're talking to being science based in responses to the pandemic, like wearing masks and things like this. What do you think is driving this and creating that physician/patient wedge?

Dr. Bailey: I really think it's politics. I said when I was AMA president, that one of the most unfortunate aspects of the pandemic was that it happened during an election year and everything got politicized, masks became a political statement, vaccines became a political statement. And the polarization in general that we see in our society has happened in attitudes toward health care as well. And I think that it's going to be hard to bring our country back together again but I really think that it's going to be hard to re-earn the trust that unfortunately has been lost in physician care.

Unger: That is a tough and ongoing challenge for medicine as a whole. On a slightly different part of the recognition and celebration part, in addition to being Doctors' Day, March is also Women's History Month. We've been talking about that throughout the month of March. You in particular have been very, very active in women's issues and a push for gender equity and the advancement of women in medicine. Unfortunately, with a pandemic, what we seen is a negative impact on a lot of these issues that we've been making gains on, especially with we're seeing, which is women physicians leaving medicine. How do we address this issue and help women physicians specifically to feel recognize, appreciated, and supported?

Dr. Bailey: Well, I think we need to be very intentional and upfront about the fact of that women physicians have always bore more responsibility for taking care of their families. And that has just gotten worse during the pandemic. We need to be intentional and honest about talking about pay equity and gaps between women and male physicians that are doing the exact same job. I think that the first part of solving a problem is recognizing it. And I think we just need to lay it out on the table, that these are issues that need to be dealt with. And women need to be supported in their ability to choose the career path and career style that works for them and for their families. And very often that doesn't work at all in academic medicine, which is so highly structured and hierarchical. And we all need to take a look at how we run our days, how we run our practices and our schedules and be willing to be more flexible because in many ways, flexibility, I think is the key.

Unger: When we think about Doctors' Day and recognizing and celebrating physicians, how important that is, I think we also have to recognize is, this is not a one day thing. This is a year round thing that we need to be concerned about. And a big part of that is recognizing that as physicians have helped this nation recover, we need to help physicians recover because there are so many things that were broken about health care before that the pandemic just made worse. What's the first thing that you would like the profession to focus on to help physicians in this road to recovery?

Dr. Bailey: One of the tiny little silver linings to the pandemic has been the explosion in telemedicine. And I think focusing on making telemedicine provisions for payment and delivery locations permanent. The AMA has been working hard on that in Washington. Everybody agrees that telemedicine is here
to stay. It offers some wonderful advantages. And I think will make doctors' lives easier in the long run if they can count on that still being there in the future.

Unger: Absolutely. Big focus for the AMA this year. Well speaking as someone who saw your leadership firsthand, and I got to speak with you many times over the course of your presidency and afterwards, you have clearly been such a strong mentor and a steady voice when we needed one, even as we were dealing with PPE shortages and the challenges of running private practice during a public health crisis. Do you have a personal message or anything that you'd like to say to physicians right now?

Dr. Bailey: I would like to remind physicians of the story that I told in my inauguration speech about physicians being heroes, by definition through what we go through in medical school and becoming a physician, we follow the heroes’ journey. And to not forget that, to remember that our purpose has not changed, our professionalism and our goal to honor our patients to take care of them will never change. And we just have to stick together and take care of each other. And that's why I think organizations like the AMA, upstate medical society, specialty societies that bring physicians together to work on common goals is so incredibly important. We need to know that we’re not alone. And I want the physicians of America and the medical students of America to know that they are not alone, that they have hundreds of thousands of colleagues along their side, through our medical organizations and especially the AMA.

Unger: Oh, thank you so much, Dr. Bailey. Really appreciate you being here and helping us celebrate both Doctors' Day and Women's History Month. In the meantime, if you need to make sure that you don't miss any of these great episodes. Subscribe on our YouTube channel, Apple, Spotify or wherever you listen to your podcasts or find them all at ama-assn.org/podcasts. Thanks for joining us today and please take care.

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