

7 turning points when the AMA met the moment in medicine

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Since its founding in 1847, the AMA has been the physician's powerful ally in patient care and an unrivaled force that promotes the art and science of medicine and the betterment of public health.

From its pioneering work to protect the public from potentially dangerous treatments, to championing the safety and efficacy of vaccines, to advocating for seat belts to be standard in all American automobiles, the AMA has often been at the forefront of sweeping movements to improve the health of our nation.

To comprehensively detail the AMA's impact is far beyond the scope of this article, but a selective approach can be revelatory as the organization celebrates its 175th anniversary on May 7. A timeline of key dates in AMA history is one place to start, and you can learn more below about seven other critical junctures—one for roughly every 25 years in the organization's history—when the AMA rose to meet the moment in medicine.

1847: Setting medical ethics standard

Since its adoption at the founding meeting of the American Medical Association in 1847, the AMA *Code of Medical Ethics* has articulated the values to which physicians commit themselves as members of the medical profession.

Philadelphia ophthalmologist Isaac Hays, MD, had the vision for establishing a national code of medical ethics, and it was one of the reasons the AMA was created. Dr. Hays proposed a national medical organization, and as chair of the Committee on Arrangement was instrumental in planning the founding meeting of the AMA in Philadelphia.

Dr. Hays and six other physicians drafted the AMA *Code of Medical Ethics*, based primarily on Dr. Thomas Percival's 1803 *Medical Ethics* and borrowing from various other codes of local medical

groups, while ensuring the language represented American physicians.

1873: Promoting adherence to professionalism

To help address the ethical that arose after the *AMA Code of Medical Ethics* was published, the AMA created the Judicial Council—a body empowered to address lapses in physician conduct.

The AMA Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs continues the oversight legacy of the former Judicial Council today. Through its policy development function, it maintains and updates the *AMA Code of Medical Ethics*. In its judicial function, it promotes adherence to the *Code's* professional ethical standards.

1897: Battling tropical diseases

In the late 1890s, malaria and yellow fever plagued workers building the Panama Canal, causing France to withdraw from the project and making room for the United States to take over the massive project. In 1898, the future president of the AMA, William Crawford Gorgas, MD, became chief sanitary officer of Havana, where he began his work on the causes of yellow fever. This allowed Americans to build the canal when the French could not.

1922: Introducing the checkup

At its 1922 meeting in St. Louis, the AMA took action to help mainstream the idea of the medical checkup. “The need and value of periodic medical examinations of persons supposedly in health are increasingly appreciated by the public,” said the item referred to the AMA Reference Committee on Hygiene and Public Health.

The AMA Council on Health and Public Instruction would, under the action, “prepare suitable forms for such examinations and ... publish them” in *JAMA*[®], and county medical societies would be encouraged “to make public declaration that their members are prepared and ready to conduct such examinations.”

According to this April 12, 2022, *JAMA Patient Page*, “routine checkups can prevent illness and encourage a healthier lifestyle. Preventing illness or identifying a health condition early can also help lower overall health costs.”

1946: Holding Nazi doctors to account

After the end of the Holocaust and World War II, the “doctors’ trial” was held in Nuremberg, Germany, starting in 1946 and extending well into 1947, part of a supplementary series of trials after the initial Nuremberg trials of 1945 that sought to hold Nazi leaders accountable for crimes against humanity.

One of the most infamous actions the Nazis took in the concentration camps was to conduct cruel and unusual medical experiments on prisoners, and this trial, formally called *United States v. Karl Brandt et al.* addressed these crimes specifically.

In need of a medical expert on their team, the American prosecution asked the AMA for a representative to join the case. The AMA’s representative outlined the ethical principles of informed consent and voluntary participation in human experimentation that helped inform what became known as the Nuremberg Code, issued as part of the Nuremberg tribunal’s judgment. The AMA also adopted these principles as part of the *AMA Code of Medical Ethics* in 1946.

Find out why future doctors must learn the Holocaust’s awful lessons.

1972: Making war on smoking

The AMA acknowledged the health hazards of smoking in the same year as the U.S. surgeon general’s landmark report on the topic, and in 1972 the AMA launched its all-out “war on smoking.”

The years to follow would feature AMA support for banning smoking on airplanes, a 1995 *JAMA* report (PDF) revealing deceptive practices by tobacco companies to hide the dangers of tobacco use, and efforts to stop cigarette advertising to minors. The AMA has in recent years highlighted the public health epidemic of e-cigarettes and vaping and supported the ban on menthol flavoring in cigarettes.

1997: Focusing on patient safety

The AMA helped establish the National Patient Safety Foundation two years ahead of the *To Err is Human* report that drew national attention to the issue. The foundation has supported a variety of initiatives, engaging multidisciplinary action toward improvement in patient safety. Efforts include an annual conference, awards, a certification program and the patient communication program “Ask Me 3.” In 2017, the organization merged with The Institute for Healthcare Improvement.



The AMA also strongly supported the Patient Safety and Quality Improvement Act of 2005 and leads physicians' efforts to measurably improve patient safety and quality of care by working to ensure its implementation. Learn how the AMA is leading this effort and what physicians can do to increase patient safety in their practices.

2022: Guiding U.S. during pandemic

As physicians have done since the COVID-19 pandemic's onset, the AMA has continued to support an evidence-based approach to protecting the public's health. During an address to the National Press Club as the pandemic entered its third year, AMA President Gerald E. Harmon, MD, outlined five key actions the nation should take to move forward.

Meanwhile, Dr. Harmon and others at the AMA are working with physicians and other thought leaders on how to smartly move beyond the pandemic.

Stay informed and updated with the AMA COVID-19 resource center for physicians.