

# Learning the painful lessons taught by 1 million lives lost

MAY 16, 2022

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How do we properly memorialize our nation's loss of 1 million lives in the COVID-19 pandemic? How can we honor the memory of those who died? How can we support those left behind, for whom life will never be the same?

There are no easy answers to these questions. But as physicians, and as leaders in medicine, we can start by committing ourselves to making sure our country is better prepared for the next great health crisis that will inevitably come. We can commit ourselves—through advocacy and grassroots action—to transforming our health system to respond more effectively to any emergency, and ensure it is better equipped to handle the diverse needs of a changing nation.

The sad truth as our nation surpasses the unimaginable toll of 1 million official deaths to COVID-19 is that deaths have been underreported since the pandemic began, more than two years ago. We may never know the actual count. But we can all agree that the price we have paid in lives lost, and in the grief inflicted upon survivors is a price we can never afford to pay again. This is especially true for the estimated 200,000 children who have lost a parent or caregiver to the pandemic.

So, what can we do? There are short-term solutions and long-term investments we must urge our country to make.

## Don't give up on vaccination

As physicians, we must continue to encourage all those who are unvaccinated against COVID-19 to become vaccinated, and to receive a booster shot when they become eligible. We must continue to encourage parents to vaccinate their children when they are eligible, and to talk with a trusted health professional if they have questions or concerns about the vaccine's safety and efficacy.

While the initial Omicron surge is behind us, the rise of even more contagious COVID-19 subvariants is concerning. We must continue to do everything within our power to protect ourselves and those close to us as this virus evolves. If we do that, we will ease the extraordinary pressure on the frontline workers in our hospitals and make it easier for everyone to receive the medical care that they need.

## **Boost public health**

As physician leaders in organized medicine, we must call on Congress to make significant investments to bolster our public health infrastructure. The fact that state public health agency funding plummeted 16% in the years before the pandemic struck—and that the corresponding payroll cuts took away nearly 40,000 jobs at state and local public health agencies during that time—left us woefully unprepared to respond effectively to COVID-19.

Restoring that funding only gets us back to a baseline level of preparedness; our public health system needs consistent, sustainable funding. The next public health emergency will demand a faster, more comprehensive and much more effective response. Our government must build adequate stockpiles of medically necessary supplies such as personal protective equipment and testing materials, then design and implement effective distribution methods and channels with clearly delineated federal and state roles.

We must remember that a robust public health infrastructure offers our best defense against infectious disease threats. This means strengthening our public health workforce and our disease surveillance systems, ensuring public health officials have the legal authority to enact reasonable, evidence-based measures to protect the health of the public, and that all communities have equitable access to public health funding and services.

It also means greatly expanding our capacity to produce vaccines, anti-microbial drugs, personal protective equipment, and a broad range of other medical supplies in sufficient quantities to protect, test and treat our population, without overreliance on offshore suppliers. And we need systems in place to ensure that physicians, nurses, other health care personnel, as well as first responders, receive any necessary vaccination or medical countermeasure on a priority basis so they can confidently care for others.

## **So many lost, so much to do**

Many other steps are needed, such as expanding the availability of telehealth services without arbitrary restrictions, as we have done so successfully during the pandemic. We must also increase

access to affordable care for all who need it.

Our nation can emerge from this crisis stronger, more united, and more prepared than ever before by taking these important steps. The actions we take now will impact the lives of generations of Americans yet unborn.

The painful memory of 1 million lives lost to COVID-19 will not soon pass, nor should it. It is up to all of us to learn, change, grow and adapt to the next threat to public health and ensure future generations are spared this unthinkable loss.