

# What's left to learn from COVID-19? Dr. Frieden outlines 3 R's

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In the aftermath of a tragedy, the public often reflects on what lessons were learned from the experience, according to Tom Frieden, MD, MPH, former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). More than two years after the COVID-19 pandemic began, Dr. Frieden said the focus should not be on what was learned, but instead on what still needs to be learned.

Those needs, he said, can be thought of as the “three R’s.”

“We need a renaissance in our public health programs,” Dr. Frieden said. “We need a robust primary health care system that’s at the center of our health care system, and we need resilient populations more able to withstand health shocks and health threats.”

Dr. Frieden discussed the “three R’s” in a recent episode of the “AMA COVID-19 Update.”

## Inaction is not an option



Tom Frieden, MD, MPH

Dr. Frieden, who is the president and CEO of Resolve to Save Lives, acknowledged that making the three R's happen will require focused, sustained attention, as well as funding. The risks of inaction, he explained, are severe.

“If we just do what we've always done, we're going to get the results we've always gotten,” he said. “That's an underprepared public health system, a weak and fragmented primary care system and a populace that is far too susceptible to infectious disease threats.”

He also believes individual clinicians can play a key role in the process.

“Every clinician can have a very important influence on their patients,” Dr. Frieden said. “After all of the culture wars and political debates, when a doctor says to her or his patient, ‘I've been vaccinated. I really want you to get vaccinated because I'm concerned that you might die if you're not up to date with your vaccine,’ that has a powerful impact.”

## The cardiovascular disease pandemic

COVID-19 is not the only pandemic the public should be focused on—the other is cardiovascular disease, Dr. Frieden said.

One in four deaths in the U.S. are from heart disease, and it is the leading cause of death. Dr. Frieden outlined three ways to combat the onslaught of cardiovascular disease:

- Reduce the amount of nicotine in cigarettes to a nonaddictive level.
- Encourage the public to reduce sodium intake and focus on hypertension control.
- Reduce Particulate Matter 2.5, which kills about 60,000 Americans every year, as many as 6–7 million people globally.

Tips for addressing hypertension are available through AMA MAP BP™, a leading evidence-based quality improvement program that provides a clear path to significant, sustained improvements in blood-pressure control. With AMA MAP BP, health care organizations can increase BP-control rates quickly. The program has demonstrated a 10% increase in blood-pressure control in six months with sustained results at one year.

Also, read up on the eight things doctors should know about smoking cessation.

## **“Now-or-never moment”**

For generations, instances of panic have been followed by stretches of neglect, Dr. Frieden said, and he’s nervous that more than two years of living through the COVID-19 pandemic has American society on the verge of a neglectful stretch. Despite that concern, he believes there is reason for hope.

“I am optimistic that given the enormous suffering and economic and educational dislocation from the pandemic, we will learn the lesson better this time,” he said. “We have perhaps the most teachable moment that we will have in our lifetimes. This is a now-or-never moment to make health care, public health, and people’s health stronger.”

Get the latest news on the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccines and variants, and more reliable information directly from experts and physician leaders with the “AMA COVID-19 Update.”

You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version.