New AMA president: Physicians must be guided by hope, not fear

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Moments after being inaugurated as the AMA’s 177th president Jack Resneck Jr., MD, peered out at the House of Medicine.

A climactic moment in and of itself, this one was of added significance, with Dr. Resneck being the first president to deliver the AMA’s presidential inaugural address to fellow delegates in person in three years. The once-in-a-lifetime COVID-19 pandemic that prevented the ceremony in 2020 and 2021 remains deadly and is still a major focus of the AMA’s work.

Speaking at the 2022 AMA Annual Meeting in Chicago, Dr. Resneck laid out the COVID-19-related challenges that made for an uphill battle for physicians—a fight that is still ongoing. Political partisanship, vaccine misinformation, the shortage of personal protective equipment, overwhelmed intensive care units, fear of getting family members sick, are among the concerns physicians have fought and, in some instances, continue to contend with.

“While it would be easy to get overwhelmed by despair, as I begin this new role, I’ve never been prouder of my physician colleagues. I’ve never been prouder to be part of this profession,” Dr. Resneck said. “And I’ve never been prouder of our AMA.”

In confronting the pandemic’s many unexpected challenges, physicians have continually adapted and excelled.

“When there is urgency, there is the possibility of unity,” said Dr. Resneck, a dermatologist from the San Francisco Bay Area. “And so now, as we gather for the first in-person inauguration since the start of this pandemic, I’m urging all of us to choose the promise of our greatest hopes, and not our fears.” (Read Dr. Resneck’s speech.)
Supporting physicians

The unity Dr. Resneck mentioned has led to great successes during the pandemic, including the rapid development of effective vaccines. And it can continue to power the profession forward and be applied to addressing issues like health system disfunction and physician burnout.

Dr. Resneck also further detailed the AMA Recovery Plan for America’s Physicians. The plan aims to rebuild critical elements of the physician profession by:

- Fixing prior authorization.
- Leading the charge to reform Medicare pay.
- Fighting scope creep.
- Supporting telehealth.
- Reducing physician burnout.

Dr. Resneck spoke of growing up as the child of a dermatologist who practiced in an era during which burnout was never discussed. Guided by the tenets of the Recovery Plan, Dr. Resneck wants to ensure that physicians have the support they need to always keep the focus on their patients, as it has been during his father’s generation and long before.

“He loved medicine’s intellectual challenges, learning from colleagues, and—most of all—connecting with patients,” said Dr. Resneck, the first dermatologist elected to the AMA’s highest office since 1925. “His example was my blueprint, and it still is today. He never discouraged me from a career in medicine, and I’m optimistic that the amazing physicians and students in this room will work to leave behind a profession worthy of inheritance by yet another generation.”

Championing equity work

Dr. Resneck comes from a family that has roots in the South, and in some instances that exposed him to the injustices of institutional racism. “My understanding of racism was unsophisticated,” Dr. Resneck said. “It certainly wasn’t informed by adequate dialogue with people experiencing redlining, educational discrimination, or violence. But I knew enough at age 16 to write an op-ed in our city’s newspaper about the need to remove Confederate monuments from our courthouse lawn. You can imagine how that went over in 1987.”
The COVID-19 pandemic further illuminated inequities that exist within the system of care. Dr. Resneck spoke glowingly of the AMA’s work on the topic through its Center for Health Equity. Still, years of inaction in the equity arena have created a deficit that will take intense effort to overcome, and the AMA and its membership haven’t always been on the right side of issues relating to racial justice.

“We have enormous capacity to reduce harms and advance equity, and that begins with reckoning openly with our past mistakes, making space for healing and transformation,” Dr. Resneck said. “I am immensely proud of our House of Delegates and our Board of Trustees for their commitment to a more just and equitable health care system work that is grounded in science and evidence and is the foundation for the more equitable future we all seek.”

In citing all the challenges on the horizon—prior authorization, physician burnout and longstanding inequities in our health system—Dr. Resneck emphasized that physicians aren’t alone. The AMA will continue to elevate physicians.

“Today, we are reminding policymakers that it’s time our nation renews its commitment to doctors and the patients we serve,” Dr. Resneck said. “Today, we work to elevate and prioritize the voices of physicians over purveyors of misinformation. Today, we fight in legislatures and in court to keep politicians from inserting themselves into our exam rooms, and dangerously criminalizing evidence-based care, including contraception, abortion and gender-affirming care.

“We will always have doctors’ and patients’ backs,” he said.

Read about the other highlights from the 2022 AMA Annual Meeting.