Time to reinforce ties between patients, doctors and public health

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Frederick M. Chen, MD, MPH, spent nearly 25 years in the family medicine department at the University of Washington and more than a decade as chief of family medicine at Harborview Medical Center in Seattle, but after two-plus years of working through the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Chen was ready for a change.

He found what he was looking for at the AMA.

Dr. Chen joined the AMA as its new chief health and science officer in July. He talked about what he sees as today’s most pressing public health challenge and what excites him about the next generation of physicians in a recent episode of “AMA Update.”

Today’s biggest public health challenge

Gun violence, climate change and COVID-19 continue to be top-of-mind issues today, Dr. Chen said, but in his eyes, the most pressing concern is the relationship between physicians and public health.

"One of the things that excited me most about coming into this role was the opportunity to help renew the public's faith in science, in medicine and in public health," he said. "We really have to double down and reinforce the idea that we physicians—and the AMA—are the trusted source of information. I think that's the best way that we can support our public health infrastructure."
Dr. Chen recognized that the public health response to a pandemic was always going to be a challenge, and in the case of COVID-19, the response became even more challenging as issues became politicized. But patients still trust physicians.

Physicians were the second-most trusted profession in a 2021 Gallup survey. Still, physicians need to work to continue instilling and maintaining that trust, something Dr. Chen said ultimately comes down to relationship-building and communications.

"Patients trust you as a physician, they expect you to be the expert and knowledgeable," he said. "And they expect the answers that you have to have a firm foundation in science and in medicine. Building that trust with patients, that's core to what we do."

He views his new role with the AMA as helping to support physicians do just that, particularly as the country continues to deal with COVID-19 and its aftermath.

"People are tired, and I think we have to recognize that," he said. "Nationally and globally, COVID is not finished. We're not done with it and it's not done with us. We have to continue to celebrate doctors and health care workers for the work that they've done and how much we relied on them and continue to rely on them."

In Dr. Chen's eyes, that celebration also includes embodying the AMA’s mission statement of pursuing the betterment of public health. That means helping physicians access up-to-date educational information and public health connections, while also pursuing advocacy efforts at the national level to help doctors practice better.

"Those are the real key pieces as we continue to recover from the pandemic," he said.

**Optimism about tomorrow’s doctors**

While Dr. Chen is concerned about physicians and public health, he is excited about the future physicians who've grown up and gone to medical school during this key point in American history. They are learning about social determinants of health, and many are driven by issues related to health equity.

Those terms are all common language for the next generation of physicians, he said.

"For them to come to medicine with a clear understanding of the link between individual patient care and what affects their communities, the activism and advocacy that's part of that, that's really heartening and it's very exciting," Dr. Chen said.
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