

When Physicians Lead

Annual Meeting 2018

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Good evening and thank you. It is my great honor to stand before you as the President of the American Medical Association.

When I was accepted into medical school, it never occurred to me that one day my peers would select me for this position. I am truly humbled and I promise you that I will do my best to live up to your expectations.

As physicians we are – first and foremost – healers.

That has been true throughout human history and it remains true even in the highly-specialized ... highly regulated ... and technologically advanced environment of health care today.

In all cultures, healers are accorded a respected status, and held to a higher standard of behavior. Our profession is unique in many ways, and our privilege as healers derives from our patients' trust ... the means through which we are able to see people as they really are ... in body and spirit.

Physicians and patients understand that any betrayal of that trust can be devastating, which is why the doctor-patient relationship is sacred ... and the cornerstone of health care.

But the role of physician ... of healer ... comes with great responsibility.

We pledge ourselves to a Code of Ethics, promising to uphold the standards that define our work, and committing ourselves to mastering our craft through lifelong learning.

As leaders, we join medical associations and specialty societies to develop and enact new policies, working to build a legacy we can be proud of.

As healers, we will always put the needs of our patients first.

We are medicine's moral compass – and our strength lays in our collective expertise ... our insights ... and our values.

As we gather tonight we are at an urgent time for health care in America. The practice of medicine as we have long known it is changing at a dizzying rate, bringing disruptive challenges but also great opportunity.

As our nation struggles to provide high-quality, affordable health care to everyone, our practices must now integrate concepts we weren't taught in medical school... population health, team-based care, estimations of quality and value, and more.

Some changes have dramatically improved care ... amazing advancements in technology ... in genomics and precision medicine...

Who could have imagined 10 years ago that today we'd treat metastatic melanoma as a chronic disease instead of a death sentence?

But each of us in this room, and our colleagues in the field, know that these sweeping changes also bring an increasingly dysfunctional economic model to health care.

Daily, we confront obstacles that make the delivery of care less efficient and, in some cases, less effective.

We see an increasing concentration of wealth and power in large corporations ... altering the power dynamic ... challenging our values and straining the critically important doctor-patient relationship.

Consider the term "providers" – as we are so often called these days. It devalues our expertise, our education, and our empathy. It demeans our status as professionals and erodes public trust.

We are not providers. WE ARE PHYSICIANS.

And as physicians we are increasingly tied up in regulations, requirements and procedures that interfere with and often delay how we care for our patients.

Our daily grind now includes two more hours every night on the computer, clicking away on electronic health records after we've put the kids to bed.

Market consolidation. Shareholders. Benefit managers. Profit margins. Rising administrative salaries.

Options for good insurance are dwindling and becoming unaffordable to large numbers of people, supplanted by choices that tout lower premiums but provide shabby benefits when life-saving care is required.

We see our patients losing the ability to choose their physicians and their site of care. This hasn't produced healthier people.

Giant insurance companies, now hand-in-hand with national pharmacy chains, seem determined to merge and further consolidate power at the very top, inevitably raising prices and shrinking options for us, and for our patients.

Hospital consolidation is squeezing out competition and driving up profits while health disparities in our communities grow, and too many people are priced out altogether.

Even the simple but important act of choosing the most appropriate consultant to whom a patient is referred – a long established tradition that independent physicians depend on – has been largely stripped from our control. This has eliminated one more crucial touch-point: discussion between peers that ensure our patients receive well-coordinated, fully informed care.

Communication between physicians can never be replaced by navigators.

And for those faced with a life-threatening diagnosis ... the patients I see in my clinic ... moving ahead with treatment often means choosing between the financial security of their family and their own health.

After all, a majority of bankruptcies in the U.S. are triggered by a medical emergency or long-term illness, and often those happen to people with health insurance.

As physicians – as healers – we see all of this and far too often we feel powerless to change the direction where health care is headed. The challenges are immense.

It's painful. It's frustrating, and it's burning us out because the health care system doesn't seem to respect us ... our patients ... or the values we are committed to uphold.

I fear we're seeing the dawning of the Medical Industrial Complex, where Americans spend far more on health care than any country on earth, and yet we rank just 19th in the industrialized world in health outcomes and 31st in life expectancy.

But here's the good news ... yes, there is good news.

As physicians we have everything we need to fix what ails our health care system.

We have the most important ingredients in our hands.

We have our patients' trust.

We have the will ... the expertise, and the view of our system from its most crucial point – inside the exam room with patients.

And thanks to organizations such as the AMA, as well as state and specialty societies, we have a voice. We have a platform from which we can lead on any issue – and work to re-align our health care system so that patients and physicians are back in the center!

You – my colleagues here tonight, and those I meet when I’m on the road – inspire me and give me hope that all is not lost.

I am encouraged by history. Nelson Mandela, from prison, took on institutional racism and apartheid in South Africa, ushering in a new era of freedom and social justice for his countrymen.

I consider the words of Margaret Mead, who wrote, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Or the writer Sylvia Plath, who once famously observed, “I don’t believe the meek will inherit the earth; The meek get trampled and ignored.”

This is our moment ... we cannot waste it. We will not be meek.

You want some more good news?

As physicians, we don’t have to go it alone.

We have each other ... dedicated, smart, creative physicians working together.

The AMA reflects our values and our interests because we write the policies, and we represent all of our diverse physician community – all backgrounds and all specialties.

I look at the fantastic leaders that we have chosen ... seated behind me on this dais. I have seen it change in my time on the Board to become more diverse and inclusive – reflecting the changing make-up of America’s doctors – and I am incredibly encouraged.

Over the last year, the AMA has been the leading voice nationally to protect patients from losing their health coverage – a precept grounded in our Code of Ethics – that we are to support access to care for all people ... and provide that care with compassion and respect for human dignity and rights.

We, the AMA, are the champions in this new era of value-based care, working directly with CMS to ease the transition for physicians, helping us avoid payment penalties, and keeping the focus where it belongs – improved outcomes for patients.

As the AMA, we know that when physicians suffer it impacts nearly every segment of medicine, which is why we have sounded the alarm about the importance of physician wellness, and worked aggressively in Washington DC to reduce administrative burdens and the most common sources of burnout.

We can ... and we must ... create a health care system that deserves to be our life's work.

We directed our AMA, this remarkable collection of dedicated doctors and management and staff, to lead the charge to reform prior authorization, which often delays treatment and negatively affects patient outcomes.

And we will keep working on regulatory burdens until we have a system that no longer impedes doctors' ability to care for patients.

We, the AMA, led a national coalition to protect consumers from further consolidation in the insurance marketplace ... and we continue to analyze and keep close watch on new attempted mergers and acquisitions.

We, the AMA, have committed ourselves to ending health disparities for at-risk populations ... raising awareness about early detection for chronic disease and expanding treatment options in underserved communities.

And we, the AMA, are committed to a more inclusive profession ... one that includes new voices, new ideas, and new leaders at the table.

The AMA is doing all of this and still our health system is suffering ... so we must do more.

Health care already runs on our licenses ... our knowledge and our expertise ... we must make it run on our values as well!

Because when physicians lead, we reject the politics and the policies that divide us. We speak out for patients.

When physicians lead we recognize the complex social determinants of health and their impact on our patients, and we will find a way through the AMA's investment in new data models to measure and address them.

When physicians lead we are willing partners with data scientists, software engineers, and tech innovators, working to bring value to the next digital breakthroughs in medicine.

When physicians lead we create a system with protections and resources for our colleagues, whether in independent practices, working in large hospital systems, or in academic institutions training our future colleagues. We must arm doctors with the skills needed to align the resources of their institutions with the goals of health.

When physicians lead we care for people regardless of race, religion, economic status or sexual orientation, and we fight policies that treat immigrants or refugees in a manner that we would not tolerate for our own families.

As physicians ... as leaders ... we work every day to honor the values that best represent us ...

... to be worthy of the trust our patients place in us ...

... and the respect that our family and friends have for us.

I am thankful to have so many of my friends and loved ones here with me tonight.

I'm immensely grateful for the support and love of my husband, Steve Kanig, Chair of the small but mighty New Mexico delegation.

I am honored that my family, Larry, Faye, Grant and Bren McAneny, Julie and Al Pitts, and Gary Kanig, are here to share this special night with me.

The partners with whom I started the New Mexico Cancer Center, Clark Haskins and Richard Giudice, and the partners who will lead it into the future, Annette Fontaine and Jose Avitia ... as well as many good friends, some of whom are also patients, have traveled to be with me as well.

I am so honored to have each of you here.

We have come a long way together.

Many of you have been part of my life since I began my career as an oncologist. Back then all I wanted was to take care of every cancer patient in New Mexico.

Some of the best lessons I've learned, that have guided me in my career, have come from my patients in their most vulnerable moments.

It's not safe to ever assume you know what someone wants; you have to ask.

Approach each patient with humility because you can't really know the values and customs of differing cultures.

But I also learned that some problems cannot be solved one patient at a time ... some require solutions that change the system.

As we work to create a system that benefits patients instead of the Medical Industrial Complex, we must realize that there is always more than one way to look at a problem.

We cannot assume that one system will work for every medical condition, every specialty, every culture or every community.

Most importantly, to change the system, our most valuable asset is the trust of our patients, and that trust must be earned every day.

We cannot avoid change.

What is not yet decided is who will manage the changes ahead in medicine.

Will the changes reflect the values of doctors or the expectations of shareholders? Will they increase health, or only increase profit?

Will we show respect in caring for all people, or save money by carving some people out of the system?

Who can be a better steward of our resources ... doctors working with patients to provide the care they value, or CEOs in the corner office?

Our patients need us to fix health care.

Now is the time for doctors -- armed with our Code of Ethics, the values of our profession, and the resources of organized medicine --to step up and create a system that is worthy of our patients and their trust!

We are physicians!

We are healers!

We are the AMA!

Thank you.

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