

Inaugural Address

““Working together to 'transform one million realities””

AMA Annual Meeting
Hyatt Regency, Chicago
Tuesday, June 11, 2019

Patrice A. Harris, MD, MA
President
American Medical Association

Good evening.

Tonight is very special for me and I am honored that each of you is here to share it.

The poet, Maya Angelou, once said, “If one is lucky, a solitary fantasy” ... and I would add, dream ... “can totally transform one million realities.”

You didn't think you'd sit through an address from a psychiatrist and not hear something about fantasies and dreams, did you?

But the great thing about psychiatrists is we can talk about dreams and fantasies ... as well as the hippocampus and the cytochrome P450 system.

It's truly a dream come true to stand before you tonight.

A dream my ancestors, parents, my extended family, and my friends supported before it even entered my imagination.

A dream my West Virginia, Georgia, psychiatry and AMA families helped me achieve.

And, I know in my heart that tonight, “I am my ancestors' wildest dreams!”

Tonight, I would like to thank:

- I. My parents,
- II. Anthony,
- III. Harris/Smith family,
- IV. Barron/Singley and Williams family,
- V. Clark/Broddie family,
- VI. My sorority sisters from Alpha Kappa Alpha,
- VII. My WVU and West Virginia friends,
- VIII. My ATLiens and Georgians who are here tonight.
- IX. And AMA management and staff

I'd also like to recognize two others who broke barriers in our organization ... Dr. Lonnie Bristow, the first African American to lead the AMA, and Dr. Nancy Dickey, the first woman to lead the AMA.

Please join me in thanking them for their contributions to the growth of our profession.

I have chosen as the theme of my inauguration "From Many Families: One."

Each of our families - whether composed of relatives, friends or colleagues -- has something to teach us, and mine are no different.

A common thread of my lessons learned is the importance of standing together:

- From my Aunt Betty who when confronted with a challenging situation, would remind me, "We Harrises stick together."
- From my Georgia family, who taught me that physicians are at our best in advocacy when we work together.
- And you, my AMA family, remind me daily that there is strength in our collective voice.

My personal journey has also taught me many valuable lessons:

First, medicine involves **a community**.

I learned this from Marcus Welby, MD, a fictional television doctor from the 1970s who actually inspired me to become a physician.

Dr. Welby not only cared for his patients inside the exam room, but he cared about their lives, their families and their communities.

Medicine relies on **teamwork**.

I learned this as a medical student in the emergency department, holding a woman's heart in my hand as a member of the on-call trauma team who worked to keep her heart beating after a motor vehicle accident.

Medicine needs a **broad perspective**.

From my work with patients who've been abused, neglected, diagnosed with a mental illness, subjected to childhood trauma, who are homeless or unemployed ...

I learned that often overlooked health determinants have an effect on one's health over a lifetime.

Medicine needs **allies**.

I have learned the critical importance of creating partnerships with legislators, community-based organizations, and the business community, and the impact of those partnerships on patient

health.

And finally, medicine's future needs leadership.

It needs **US, the AMA, to lead the way.**

Last month, I gave the commencement address at the Morehouse School of Medicine.

There I saw the future:

I saw our brilliant and highly-motivated future colleagues, who cannot wait to stand where we are, and who are counting on us to lead before we pass the baton.

Our personal journeys inform the people we become.

Just as I am the sum of my parts ...

An African American woman, a psychiatrist, and a child from the heart of coal country... so each of you is the sum of your parts ...where you came from, your specialty, and your experiences.

Our diversity is the source of our strength as we face medicine's most daunting challenges.

From geography, to specialty to age and gender ... our uniquely lived experiences shape who we are as people ... and as physicians.

While we have many differences, at the AMA, we have this common goal:

Through this great organization, we BELIEVE WE CAN uplift our entire profession ... improve care for ALL of our 300-plus million fellow Americans ... and stand as leaders in health care across the globe.

And lead we must and we will.

But, our core values:

access to health care for all;
diversity and inclusion;
the primacy of the patient-physician relationship;
the advancement of science and public health

...will not be part of the health care landscape unless we ensure that they are.

Over our 172-year history as an organization, we have faced many challenges.

We are all too well aware of what we face today:

- While the Affordable Care Act brought coverage to millions of Americans, millions still lack

coverage, and there are those who want to roll back the gains we have made.

- Far too many people - one in two adults - struggle with chronic conditions like diabetes and heart disease;
- Though we've made progress, the face of medicine still fails to match the faces of our patients;
- People living in rural areas too often have to drive hundreds of miles to the nearest physician, or hospital;
- Overdoses continue to outpace other causes of premature death and wreak havoc on our communities;
- Our young people are subject to the dangers of e-cigarette use at epidemic levels;
- And pharmaceutical prices continue to soar.

I see these not as intractable problems but as intractable opportunities ... opportunities that we as physicians fully embrace.

We don't run away from problems ... physicians run towards them!

That is our role, our responsibility, our AMA mission.

We can make a difference and we do make a difference.

Our formula for success: community, teamwork, a broad perspective, professional allies and a willingness to lead.

While a year is not a long time, like all who came before me, I, too, hope to leave a mark on the AMA, both as a child and adolescent psychiatrist, and as the first African American woman to hold this position.

When I look back on my time as President, I hope to say:

- We turned the promise of parity for mental health into reality.
- We moved the needle on health equity.
- We reformed prior authorization so that more patients could get the right care at the right time.
- We saw the end to the opioid epidemic on the horizon, and furthered alliances in Washington and across every state to remove barriers to treatment for those diagnosed with substance use disorders.

One of my favorite poems about leadership was written by Mary Lou Anderson.

She wrote, "Leaders are called to stand in that lonely place between the **no longer** and the **not yet** ... and intentionally make decisions that will bind, forge, move and create history."

When it comes to health equity, to mental health, and to many other issues, medicine IS in that lonely place between the “no longer” and the “not yet,” and we must act intentionally to move forward.

We are **no longer** at a place where those with mental illness and addiction are hidden and ignored, but we are **not yet** at a place where mental disorders are viewed without stigma, and truly integrated into health care.

We are **no longer** at a place where we can tolerate the disparities that plague communities of color, women, and the LGBTQ community.

But we are **not yet** at a place where health equity is achieved in those communities.

And **not yet** at a place where women can live with confidence that we are firmly in charge of our own medical decisions.

We are **no longer** at a place where underrepresented groups are unwelcomed in medicine; but we are **not yet** at a place where African American men are entering, or graduating, from medical schools at the rates of their peers.

We are **no longer** at a place where we can tolerate bureaucratic government and payor requirements that add to the cost of care without increasing value ... but **not yet** at a place where we have eliminated unnecessary regulations and can truly focus on care.

We are **no longer** at a place where we can turn a blind eye to the chronic conditions that plague half of American adults, but **not yet** at a place where everyone has access to affordable health care.

Colleagues, as medicine's leaders, we **all** need to stand in those sometimes lonely places, and make decisions now that will move us forward to a future we help create.

So I ask you to join me in taking the next step of leadership and “intentionally make decisions that will bind, forge, move and create history.”

The AMA has led the way on innumerable public health advances throughout its history.

Let us commit tonight to move medicine forward again this year. . . as we state emphatically that health, in all its dimensions, is a basic human right.

We can do this!

Because when we all join together, bringing our differing perspectives, backgrounds, experiences and resources to bear ... that's when we can truly move medicine forward for the good of our patients, the profession, the nation and the world.

I'll close with one more quote from Maya Angelou, who said, “Life is not measured by the

number of breaths we take but by the moments that take our breath away.”

For me, tonight is one of those moments.

I am honored that each of you is here to share it with me, and by the trust you have placed in me.

I can promise you that the legacy of the AMA will be in good hands as we work together “to transform one million realities.”

Good night, Mom. Good night, Dad.

###