

Susan R. Bailey, MD

Address to the AMA House of Delegates
November 13, 2020

Reimagining the Future of Medicine in a Post-COVID World

Mister Speaker, officers, delegates, physician and student colleagues, distinguished guests. . .

In my inaugural address in June, I talked about how a hero's journey is symbolic of the journey we walk as physicians.

Our journey starts with a moment of inspiration to pursue medicine. We find a mentor to show us the way. We encounter struggles and hardships before emerging stronger and more resilient . . . forever changed by the experience.

Few times in history have we embodied the hero's journey like we have in this past year. In June I talked about Harry Potter, Star Wars, and The Wizard of Oz, but much of the last few months have felt more like the dystopian world of The Hunger Games.

COVID-19 has brought immense challenges and pain for so many – including our physician community. We have struggled mightily at times.

Some of us know a colleague who lost their life to COVID-19. Many of us have fallen ill, or we have watched a family member or loved one battle the virus.

We have done things in 2020 that we could not have imagined . . . shining a spotlight in an uncomfortable place – on ourselves – as we repeatedly cried out for more protective equipment to keep us and our patients safe.

For the financial aid to keep our struggling practices afloat.

For the information and resources to make sense of it all. To provide counsel for our patients. To better understand what we were up against.

As we approach the end of 2020, the pandemic feels a little different now.

We don't know if it is the end of the beginning, or the beginning of the end. But we are a bit wiser . . . and a bit tougher than before.

We don't know everything about the journey ahead, but there is plenty we do know.

This year has shown us the best in physicians and our health care community – the nurses, assistants and staff personnel who are always on our side.

Who are in the trenches with us even in the most difficult of times and that understand the importance of physician-led teams.

But this year also has revealed how politics can be corrosive and how misinformation and anti-science rhetoric can impede our ability to respond in a health emergency ... and can magnify the cracks and inequities in our health system.

Nine months into our fight against COVID-19, the pandemic is as dangerous as ever. We have reached record highs – a milestone of more than 100,000 new cases a day. Surges continue across the country.

More than 10 million of our fellow citizens have become infected. Nearly two hundred and fifty thousand have died.

We have learned in this most difficult year that no person and no community is safe from this virus. It reaches everyone, no matter their background, their income, or their politics.

And yet, in face of this pandemic ... perhaps the greatest threat to public health in our lifetimes ... physicians have heroically answered the call.

Time and again ... through surges and plateaus ... working under intense pressure and at great personal risk ... our physician community has risen to the challenge of this moment.

We have done this with courage and with selflessness because of our singular dedication to our patients' health.

And now, with a new year ahead and possible vaccines on the horizon, we are about to make a fresh start. Change is in the air.

Never again can we allow the politics of division to undermine our ability to deliver the very best care to our patients.

Never again can we allow anti-science bias and rhetoric to undermine our public health institutions and discredit the work of physicians, scientists and researchers.

Never again can we allow a campaign of misinformation and disinformation to co-opt conversations around public health and to sew divisions that only serve to prolong the suffering of so many.

Never again can we allow public health officials to feel the pressure of threats and intimidation simply for doing their jobs.

And when lives are at stake, never again should physicians have to fight a war on two fronts – caring for severely ill patients in a raging pandemic while at the same time battling a public relations war that questions the legitimacy of our work and our motives.

This is unacceptable ... and we will not go back.

While we have seen the best of physicians in 2020, we were reminded again of the power of the AMA and of the entire Federation community working on our behalf ... and being our voice when it mattered most.

Our AMA created tools and resources – all grounded in credible science and evidence – to help us respond to this historic crisis.

We pushed the administration to accelerate production for testing and PPE.

Our AMA helped establish a financial lifeline for struggling physician practices, securing tens of billions of dollars in financial support, grants and interest-free loans to infuse practices with much-needed capital to survive this pandemic.

Our AMA was a leading national voice in support of science, evidence and data as the surest path through this pandemic, launching a major public health campaign to encourage everyone, everywhere to **Mask Up**.

All of us should be proud of how the AMA has stood up for physicians this year.

As with every hero's story, we must learn from the trying times we have experienced. We must grow and move forward because that is what a hero is asked to do.

That is what physicians are expected to do.

That is what we expect of ourselves.

All of us are eager to see an end to this pandemic. And with encouraging new reports about vaccines in the late trial stages, there is tremendous excitement about what the new year will bring.

But we are not there yet. All of us need to continue to do our parts. We need to remain steadfast and focused until the very end.

We should not underestimate the fight in our opponent. Every time we feel like we have COVID-19 on the ropes, here and abroad, we see it roaring back.

We have to remain strong and follow where the science leads us.

The next few months will be buzzing with anticipation about the post-COVID world that will emerge.

Regardless of when that day arrives ... and when normalcy returns, whatever that looks like ... our AMA will play a critical role in shaping the health system of the future.

A system that ensures that everyone has access to the affordable and meaningful coverage they need.

A system that relies on science, evidence, and data to guide our approach to public health and prevention

A system free of the historic barriers to care and ensures that all patients stand on equal footing.

A system that supports and integrates a revitalized public health infrastructure.

A system that protects the patient-physician relationship from outside influence at all costs.

And a system that prioritizes physician health and wellness and eases administrative burdens that take us away from what we do best ... caring for our patients.

Despite the challenges of this past year, and they have been extraordinary, I continue to believe in the power of organized medicine to fix the persistent problems in our health system.

I believe in science and evidence to light our way.

And I believe in the strength and resolve of physicians to take on any challenge and rise to any moment.

The hero's journey is our journey. And we are exactly where we are meant to be.

Thank you.

###