



Leadership in the Midst of COVID-19

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The last few months have been some of the most arduous and tumultuous of my adult life. The impact of COVID-19 has had an unimaginable domino effect on businesses, government, health care, and the entire world as we know it—with Wyoming earning no exemption.

Prior to the COVID-19 response becoming our organization's top priority, the Wyoming Medical Society (WMS) had been involved in a wide range of important policy discussions in Wyoming. We worked furiously to prepare for and navigate the legislative session which, despite being a budget session, was replete with legislative issues that could have profound impact on our members. Just as the session was wrapping up and we thought about celebrating our successes and learning from our failures, a global pandemic starts to take off in our country. What a time to be in leadership!

I joined WMS to add my voice in support of physicians, PAs and our patients, and I believe strongly in the mission and values of our organization. I am proud and humbled by the multitude of ways our members and leaders reflect these values in their lives and practices. As the president of this society, it is a great privilege to absorb as much of this as possible, reflect upon my own values and goals, and help lead our board in working through the incredibly diverse set of challenges we face as health care leaders in Wyoming.

As COVID-19 cases began to crop up in Wyoming I made the decision to close my practice to in-person visits. While my clinic was technologically prepared for this adaptation of practice prior to the coronavirus—an advantage many clinics across the state of Wyoming do not share—the economic impact of this decision was still immediate, drastic and devastating. Nevertheless, telehealth has worked well to keep basic operations running and the federal support being offered through the CARES Act has given me reason to hope our practice will survive.

While the business decision of closing our doors and conducting all clinic visits virtually had far reaching impacts

on my practice, it felt like the right thing to do for good of our patients and larger community. The value of social distancing had already been objectively demonstrated in many regions around the world. More importantly, the failure to keep people apart has resulted in catastrophic death rates globally. The clear lesson I drew from these observations is that waiting for the appearance of exponential growth in case rates before enforcing social distancing is a terrible mistake. As leaders in health care, it was my fervent belief that WMS needed to be at the forefront in encouraging social distancing.

I was never under the impression that we had any enforcement authority or that there are not other important considerations that need to be taken into account when deciding the best course of action for our state. Speaking out in favor of a statewide shelter-in-place order seemed to be entirely consistent with the mission and goals of our

organization. We had vigorous discussion on this topic and the overwhelming majority of WMS board members voiced support for a shelter-in-place order, so we sent a letter to Gov. Mark Gordon asking him to consider doing this.

Sending this letter placed WMS squarely in the middle of state and national discussions about the public health response to COVID-19; which is exactly where we belong. I had several substantive conversations with Gov. Gordon, and he wholeheartedly thanked us for being engaged and taking the strong position that we did. Encouraging social distancing at this time is a clear public health good, with which very few physicians or PAs would disagree. Our role, as advisor to elected leaders, is to reflect these public health concerns. There are certainly other societal priorities the governor must consider, which are decidedly not central to the mission and goals of WMS. The governor has done a superb job of balancing these issues and has fully embraced the concerns we expressed—if not wholly adopting our recommendations. He has told me that strong leadership from WMS on this issue has enhanced the political leverage he has needed to continue pushing for social distancing, which is perhaps

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even more important in the coming weeks as some constituents begin pushing hard for relaxation of the closures and distancing requirements. The WMS community understands the importance of flattening the curve and maintaining social distancing as the case numbers dwindle toward zero, but it might not feel logical or bear the same level of importance to those on the outside looking in. As health care leaders, we must continue to educate the public on the profound dangers of letting up too soon and risking the loss of benefits that our hard work and collective sacrifices have already afforded us. As your president, I will continue to maintain a public presence to the extent of my ability to encourage our communities to stay home until we have solid plans to reopen schools and businesses by using extensive acute and convalescent testing, contact tracing, and a rational evaluation of business' capacity to operate safely. These are extraordinarily complex issues, and I am very proud of the central role our society has taken in the development of clear and appropriate public health policy in our state. I concur with Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, that our elected leadership has done a superb job to date and WMS will continue to play a vital role in advising them in the crucial weeks ahead.

Speaking with one voice

WMS members have stepped up at every level of practice and leadership and have made me prouder than I have ever been to be a physician. Our weekly Zoom conferences, attended by 50-125 members, have been very fruitful in helping guide WMS leadership. The conferences are also promoting solidarity of purpose in protecting the health of our communities. As many have noted before, practicing in Wyoming yields the unique opportunity to directly engage our elected leaders. U.S. Sen. John Barrasso, a regular participant in our weekly Zoom meetings, provides welcome insight into the national conversation about COVID-19, as well as warm words of support to our front-line physicians and PAs. The opportunity to engage one-on-one with the governor and his health care policy advisors, ensuring the perspectives of our members are thoroughly reflected in these conversations, is among the most rewarding things about living in this wonderful state.

Ultimately, it is this last part that lends me the greatest pause. How do we know our efforts genuinely reflect the views of our members? We have an incredibly engaged and diligent board of directors who provide representative leadership for their communities. Our executive committee leads with the collective WMS leadership experience of several. And yet, during times of challenge and strife we often hear from members that they don't feel heard or fairly represented. Part of this is built into the political process by which we elect leadership. At the heart of this issue we must answer the question: How can WMS more fully engage its membership, thereby representing individuals more democratically?

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Our society depends entirely on speaking with one voice in support of physicians, PAs and our patients. If significant portions of our membership see themselves as separate from the process of policy development then we run the risk of fragmenting our voice and losing the strength we have built over many decades, which has historically enabled us to participate in the development of health care policy. If our unity is lost, we may forfeit our ability to support the interests and practices of our members. In short, WMS cannot meet its goals and support its mission if our members cannot or will not vigorously support our collective efforts.

Engaging our members in productive and meaningful ways as advisors to our board is critical for our future as a society. Physician and PA engagement with elected leaders is central to keeping this project alive, but we can do even better by adopting tools used by other state medical societies to engage members in real time discussions and shape policy initiatives that your elected leadership can carry forward on your behalf. We must modernize our approach to membership inclusion and welcome more diverse and varied voices to the table. In this way we can strengthen the society, truly speak with one voice, and thereby better equip our political leaders to develop policy with the health of our communities held front and center.

COVID-19 is going to change our world forever. Let's ensure that Wyoming health care is changed for the better — together. 