

EDITORIAL

Together We Lead: Advocacy, Physician Wellness, and the Future of Medicine in Mississippi

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Dr. Katherine Pannel's final presidential address reflects on her year of service as the 157th President of the Mississippi State Medical Association and the collective accomplishments of Mississippi physicians in advancing patient care and protecting the medical profession. The address highlights advocacy efforts supporting physician-led care, common-sense health policies, and the continued funding and expansion of the Alzheimer's respite program, emphasizing the impact of physician engagement in the legislative process.

A central focus of the address is the growing challenge of physician mental health and wellness. Dr. Pannel describes the burdens physicians face, including grief, administrative demands, litigation, staffing shortages, moral injury, burnout, and increasing public distrust of the medical profession. She identifies misinformation and the erosion of trust in medicine as defining challenges for physicians and emphasizes the responsibility of physicians to communicate evidence-based information, engage patients and communities, and defend the role of science in health care.

The address also underscores the importance of creating a medical culture in which physicians are supported in seeking help and where wellness is valued alongside productivity. Dr. Pannel calls for continued efforts to reduce stigma surrounding physician mental health and to recognize that physician well-being is fundamental to the delivery of quality patient care.

Concluding with a message of gratitude and optimism, Dr. Pannel challenges Mississippi physicians to remain engaged in advocacy, mentorship, service, and leadership. Her address emphasizes that the future of medicine depends on physicians working collectively with courage, compassion, and a shared commitment to their patients, their profession, and one another.

One year ago, I stood before you humbled, excited, and maybe just a little terrified, asking for the opportunity to be your voice.

I told you then that the work was just beginning.

Today, I stand before you with a heart that is even fuller than it was that evening - not because of anything I accomplished alone, but because of what *we* accomplished together.

Thank you.

Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for trusting a psychiatrist from the Mississippi Delta to represent every physician across our great state. Thank you for your confidence, your friendship, your guidance, and your willingness to stand shoulder to shoulder in the fights that mattered.

Serving as the 157th President of the Mississippi State Medical Association has been the greatest honor of my professional life.

When I accepted this office, I promised to be brave enough to be your voice.

Together, we did exactly that.

Over the past year, we continued defending physician-led care because our patients deserve healthcare led by those with the highest level of training. We finished the session with not one scope bill even making it to committee.

We continued advocating for common-sense policies that strengthen our profession and protect the people we serve.

We continued pushing forward the Alzheimer's respite program - a cause that has remained deeply personal to me. What began as a resolution born from watching my own family struggle has grown into something that is now helping Mississippi families who are walking that same difficult road. Seeing caregivers receive support reminds me why advocacy matters. Behind every piece of legislation is a family just hoping for one less impossible burden. We were successful in getting the program funded again and even added slots for families. We also have the commitment of key lawmakers to continue to work, promote, fund, and grow this incredible program.

We continued championing physician advocacy in every corner of this state. We spoke with one voice. We built relationships; we repaired relationships. We showed lawmakers that Mississippi physicians will always fight for our patients first.

Most importantly, we proved something I have always believed.

When physicians unite, we are unstoppable.

None of these accomplishments belong to one president.

They belong to every physician who answered a phone call, sent an email, testified before a committee, attended a meeting after a long day in clinic, or simply refused to believe that our profession should settle for less than excellence.

This year reminded me that leadership is never about standing in front.

It is about standing beside people who share a common purpose.

And what a privilege it has been to stand beside each of you.

When I gave my inaugural address, I spoke about purpose.

I spoke about advocacy.

I spoke about protecting our profession.

I spoke about unfinished business.

Today, I can proudly say that together we moved those goals forward. We didn't simply talk about change, we created it. We didn't wait for someone else to lead, we became the leaders our profession needed.

But if you've listened to me speak over the years, you know there is one issue that continues to pull at my heart.

Physician mental health.

Although my presidential term is ending, my commitment to that cause is not.

It is, and always will be, deeply personal.

Every day, physicians walk into exam rooms carrying burdens our patients never see. We shoulder grief, impossible expectations, administrative overload, litigation, staffing shortages, moral injury, and the quiet loneliness that too often accompanies our calling. Today, we are also facing something I am not sure we have ever experienced on this scale: the growing public vilification of physicians. That erosion of trust has become yet another source of moral injury, fueling burnout at a time when our profession is already stretched to its limits.

When I took office, one of my dearest mentors, Dr. Hays, told me that every president faces a defining crisis. I briefly wondered if mine would be hantavirus, Ebola, or even, more recently, lettuce. But it wasn't. The defining challenge of this year has been something far more pervasive: the war against misinformation and the growing distrust of medicine itself.

Every day, we are working to build trust with our patients while social media, misinformation, and influencers chip away at that trust with every viral post. Much of this year has been spent confronting falsehoods - that Tylenol causes autism, that vaccines cause autism, that SSRIs cause mass shooters. Each time I stepped forward to provide evidence and explain the science, the interviews and conversations were met with a flood of comments, many filled with even more misinformation, hostility toward physicians, and rejection of scientific evidence.

I do not believe this challenge is going away anytime soon. That is why we cannot retreat. We must continue to lead with courage, compassion, and conviction. We must be willing to speak, to educate, and to engage, even when it is difficult. Every conversation matters. Every patient interaction matters. Every voice matters.

Use your voice. Strengthen trust in medicine. Stand up for science. And continue to serve your communities with the integrity and compassion that define our profession. Our patients - and the future of medicine - depend on it.

And caring for one another is one of the greatest responsibilities we have as physicians.

So, while my year as your president comes to an end, my work in physician wellness and mental health is only beginning.

I will continue advocating for systems that value physicians as much as productivity.

I will continue fighting to remove stigma wherever it exists.

I will continue working toward a culture where seeking help is seen as an act of courage instead of an admission of failure.

Because healthy physicians provide healthier care.

And every physician deserves the same compassion we so freely give our patients.

As I look around this room tonight, I don't just see colleagues.

I see mentors.

Friends.

Heroes.

People who answered the call to serve despite enormous challenges.

People who continue showing up every single day because someone, somewhere, needs them.

That is what makes this profession extraordinary.

Not perfection.

Purpose.

I still believe what I said a year ago.

We are living through a time of profound change.

But now I know something else with even greater certainty.

I have seen what Mississippi physicians can accomplish when we refuse to stand on the sidelines.

I have seen us choose collaboration over division.

Hope over discouragement.

Action over complacency.

And because of that, I have never been more optimistic about our future.

To the next generation of leaders, be bold. Speak up. Ask hard questions.

Protect what matters.

Never underestimate what one physician with conviction can accomplish.

And remember that leadership isn't about titles. It's about service.

To every member of this association, thank you for allowing me to serve.

Thank you for your trust.

Thank you for your grace.

Thank you for reminding me that organized medicine is not simply an organization... It is a family.

As my presidency concludes, I leave this office with tremendous gratitude, unwavering hope, and an even deeper love for this profession than when I began.

Our work is not finished.

In truth, it never will be.

But I know this:

The future of medicine in Mississippi is bright because of the people sitting in this room.

Keep advocating.

Keep mentoring.

Keep caring.

Keep leading.

And above all, keep believing that together we can build a profession worthy of those who will one day follow us.

It has been the honor of a lifetime to serve as your president.

Thank you, God bless you, and let's keep going.

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