

Senate Health and Human Services Committee
Testimony of Debra Patt, MD
Texas Medical Association
March 10, 2021

Honorable Chair Kolkhorst and Committee Members:

My name is Debra Patt, MD, and I'm an oncologist in Austin. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the more than 55,000 members of the Texas Medical Association (TMA) to discuss the clinical response to COVID-19 and the current state of the pandemic in Texas.

Texas physicians have been on the front lines fighting COVID-19 – fighting for our patients' lives – every day for more than a year. Besides combating a novel disease we at first knew little about, we have faced other challenges, including these:

- **Personal protective equipment (PPE) was in short supply.** In April last year we saw 78% of physician practices experiencing and anticipating a lack of PPE. In many areas of the state, Regional Advisory Councils unfortunately often overlooked private practices as priority recipients of PPE, leaving physicians to salvage whatever PPE they could find to still see their patients safely. Primary care and family physicians are also on the front lines of the pandemic, seeing patients with their first symptoms of COVID-19 and taking care of the mildly and moderately ill. Primary care plays a key role in helping maintain the health care system, providing needed care that helps prevent patients from having to go to the emergency department and overwhelming hospital systems even more.
- **Practices fought to stay afloat, and practice viability was severely threatened.** During COVID-19, Texas physicians have seen significant drops in income, reduced work hours, furloughs, and layoffs. We have struggled during this unprecedented pandemic, when physicians were needed the most, with some of us being unable to keep our practices open or make ends meet.
- **Patients delayed the surgeries, procedures, care, and vaccinations they needed,** resulting in worsened health outcomes and increased disease threat. As patients avoided doctors' offices, conditions like cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and other serious chronic conditions were left untreated. As an oncologist, I've seen patients with metastasized cancer that should have been screened for, detected, and treated months ago. Texas saw a stark drop – as much as a 43% decrease in April 2020 – in the number of vaccinations administered in Texas within the Texas Vaccine for Children program.¹ Thankfully, vaccinations have rebounded slightly, but the threat of vaccine-preventable infectious disease outbreaks on top of the

COVID-19 pandemic continues to remain an issue the more children are left behind on getting their vaccines.

- **Physicians struggle to get COVID-19 vaccinations for themselves, their staff, and patients.** Even now, some Texas physicians classified under 1A have been unable to access COVID-19 vaccine for themselves and their staff. TMA absolutely understood and supported opening up eligibility to our most vulnerable elderly residents. However, many physicians were left in the lurch – especially those in private practice and in rural areas, and those unaffiliated with hospitals. Physicians wanting to continue safely seeing their patients found themselves caught up in the open flood of people trying to get vaccinated. And though we understand the need to get vaccine into as many arms as possible as quickly as possible, we do urge continued allocation to private practices. Many physicians already administer vaccines, have standing relationships with their patients, provide trusted consultation, can address vaccine hesitancy, and know and understand their patients’ comorbidities and health risks. The ability for patients to be able to go see their trusted family physician to get their COVID-19 vaccine sounds like a luxury right now but ultimately should be the state’s goal.
- **The continued stress on physicians over the past year has caused burnout and strain on mental health.** This pandemic has no doubt been an exhausting ultra-marathon of uncertainty, anxiety, and pressure for all of us, especially physicians and health care workers. Though there is a light at the end of the tunnel from the available vaccines, we still have thousands of Texans hospitalized and hundreds dying every day due to COVID-19,² so physicians have a long way to go. TMA hopes for continued support from state agencies and lawmakers to help contribute to decreased cases, hospitalizations, and deaths to lower the pressure and strain that challenge physicians and the health care system.

Moving forward with the COVID-19 response, TMA recommends the following be considered:

1. Maintain a Texas stockpile of PPE to respond quickly to health threats with enough of the right products when a disaster or disease strikes, and prioritize allocation to physicians who are on the front lines in their communities caring for patients.
2. Bolster practice viability by further supporting the implementation of telemedicine modalities and ensuring continued payment parity with in-person services.
3. Urge the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, the Texas Department of State Health Services, and any other state health agencies to encourage patients to seek out the preventive health care they need.
4. Prioritize COVID-19 vaccine allocation to physicians in private practice, especially those who care for the most vulnerable, high-risk populations, such as the elderly, those with comorbidities, or people of color.
5. Resist and avoid prescribing medical practice into law or regulation. Physicians are trained to pull from the latest science and data, and along with their own medical expertise, choose the best care for their patients. Just as we had never heard of COVID-19 before 2020, we do not know what infectious diseases are on our horizon, and the last thing we want is to put in statute a law that may actually hinder an effective outbreak response in the future.

Despite the challenges, TMA has been grateful for the research, response, communication, and support from the Texas Department of State Health Services throughout the pandemic. We are thankful for the PPE received from Texas Department of Emergency Management, which has resulted in TMA being able to send direly needed PPE to thousands of physicians across the state. We appreciate the state’s purchase of remdesivir and monoclonal antibody treatments,

which have saved countless patients' lives. And we are thankful for this legislature continuing to prioritize Texas lives as we look for ways to bolster our infectious disease response for when the next pandemic hits.

We thank you again for the opportunity to comment, and I am happy to take any questions.

¹ Texas Department of State Health Services. (Sept. 16, 2020). Impacts of COVID-19 on TVFC Vaccine Administration. www.dshs.texas.gov/immunize/docs/COVID19impactTVFC.pdf

² Texas Department of State Health Services. COVID-19 Case Dashboard. <https://txdshs.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/ed483ecd702b4298ab01e8b9cafc8b83>