The following is the Presidential address of the Southern Medical Association’s (SMA) 2020–2021 President, Dr. Christopher Morris. Dr. Morris was installed on Saturday, October 10, 2020, during SMA’s Southern Regional Assembly which was held virtually October 9–10, 2020.

We have learned a lot from this year’s coronavirus pandemic. First and foremost, it has confirmed humans are truly social animals. We have seen an uptick in depression and suicide in part because of being physically separated from one another. Many of us have tried telemedicine; admittedly it has helped us provide some care during these trying times, but I have not figured out how to palpate joints or perform joint injections via Zoom. Virtual meetings have become the norm this year; while the education remains excellent, I honestly miss the chance to interact with friends and colleagues I have made over the years at previous SMA Assemblies.

We have also seen the importance of rapid dissemination of information on early diagnosis and treatment options for COVID. The approach has been multidisciplinary; even rheumatologists, with our expertise in immune modulating medications, have played a role in providing appropriate treatments.

In some ways, the changes we have seen are a microcosm of medicine in general. In the past, medical practitioners would discuss cases with colleagues via what was known as the “curbside consult”; today, we rarely have the chance to interact with practitioners of other specialties other than the rare phone call. When I think back, I can recall numerous instances where a curbside consult really helped a patient. While technologic advances and telemedicine have their benefits, the overreliance on technologic advances may not improve medical care, with one casualty being the physician-patient relationship.

The Southern Medical Association remains a unique opportunity for practitioners of every medical specialty to come together and learn with each other, as well as learn FROM each other. As a rheumatologist I deal with diseases that can affect every organ system; as such, I recognize the benefits of a good multidisciplinary education to help me provide my patients the best care possible.

The SMA is unique in terms of medical education. We all have our specialty organizations, and their educational programs are certainly important. The truth is that my patients are not just one disease; they are living humans who often have multiple problems and develop other health issues that affect the diseases I treat. For this reason, educational programs SMA offers help me to provide more complete care to my patients.

My first experience with SMA was as a resident, nervously presenting my very first paper in Nashville. The positive experience I had at that meeting has led to nearly 30 years of SMA Assemblies and other programs. My goal is that next year’s Assembly will be the best ever. I hope to put a program together that primary care people will get information that they can use immediately in their practices. We also need to strive to bring back the Internal Medicine specialists by ensuring that the program includes talks relevant to issues their patients face. Finally, we need to ensure the lectures will also provide valuable knowledge to the surgical specialists as well.

I first presented papers at SMA Assemblies as a resident, then as a fellow; the confidence I gained from these experiences has stayed with me throughout my career. We need to ensure that we can provide a positive experience to today’s trainees; the future of the SMA depends upon getting younger physicians into the habit of getting their CME through the SMA. This year we have seen a significant jump in the number of papers to be presented; I will do everything I can to ensure that they all have as positive an experience as I had.

I have had numerous experiences where a “curbside consult” over lunch with colleagues has benefitted my patients’ care. I hope that one program we can have at our meetings is a “curbside lunch”, during which attendees might be able to get some guidance on a vexing case they have in their practice from other specialists in attendance.

I believe that medical meetings provide a great chance to learn away from the distractions of one’s practice; for many, however this means time away from the family. My children grew up attending SMA Assemblies; I hope that we can have our meeting at a place where families are welcome, and have access to family-friendly activities while the practitioner is getting top-notch CME.

Not everyone can get away to our Assembly. SMA has been expanding their educational programs available via their website, and I want to continue this. The lectures at our Assemblies will be available to permit attendees a chance to go back and repeat a talk for reinforcement of the concepts presented. Additionally, we need to expand website-based topics to ensure that there is something for everyone. One idea I have would be to try and ensure that we have online educational programs that would fulfill some of the specific educational requirements for state licensure for every state in the U.S. I’d like the Education Committee to take up this initiative this year. I would like SMA to be the go place for everything CME.

Over the past 2 decades I have had over 150 residents perform rotations in my office. Trainees are increasingly expected to give presentations at meetings; this provides SMA an opportunity to provide a venue for such presentations. We need to continue to support our Physicians-In-Training Leadership Working Group led by Ms. Natalie Weiss and Dr. Dantwan Smith. Hopefully in 2021 we will be able to get the abstract competitions we began planning last year back on track. As an added benefit we could incorporate a “job fair,” providing practices and hospital systems a chance to promote opportunities in areas that are
underserved. If we can draw trainees from programs outside our region to our sessions, perhaps we can help bring some of them to practice in our region.

We are seeing a revival of various services available to SMA members. These perquisites add value to the SMA membership; some of these include insurance and financial programs that can provide additional security to the physicians and their families. I hope that over the next year these will expand even further. I urge you to go to the website (https://sma.org) and learn about the benefits an SMA membership provides you.

The states covered by the Southern Medical Association are facing physician shortages that affect access to healthcare. Strong continuing educational opportunities can help bring more practitioners to these underserved areas as well as improve care given to those in these areas. A vibrant SMA can help with attracting physicians to the region, as well as helping to retain these same physicians. The SMA has leadership who believe in this organization and want it to thrive. We always welcome new ideas and new help; we would love all of you to help us with the renaissance of the Southern Medical Association.

In short, I want everyone to know that SMA is the medical home for physicians who want to mentor, educate, and to give back their profession the priceless things they've learned over their time in research, academia, and practice.

I want students and residents to know SMA is their home as well. A comfortable place to present their work, to ask those “dumb questions” without fear, and to stay connected for continuing nonbiased, multidisciplinary medical education, and peer support throughout their career. We also recognize the importance of the business side of medicine and practice managers.

I also want practice managers to know SMA is a place they can go to get clear and honest practice management advice and financial services. The place where medical and business professionals come together to learn from each other, support each other to ultimately make the American healthcare system strong and accessible.

And lastly, the SMA family would not be whole without the SMA Alliance. It's very important to me we reconnect these family members who were alienated through the course of reorganizing our governing structure. I plan to make time this year to speak directly with as many Alliance members I can to figure out how to bring our best advocates back home. Doctors’ Day, Health Education, and Medical Heritage projects are an important part of our future.

SMA is my family of medicine. The place where I started, so many parts of my medical activity and have remained connected throughout my career. I ask you to join me this year in helping make our family bigger and stronger.