

Women's Network—A Challenging Six Years Since COVID-19... But I'm Optimistic and Determined

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It is an understatement that the last six years have been challenging for providers of health care, not only with frontline workers experiencing the most visceral consequences but also with significant downstream effects on the attorneys and other professionals who support and defend them. But as trying as the last six years have been for those who touch health care, there is still reason for celebration and hope.

COVID-19 was officially labeled a pandemic in March 2020, and readers of this article will remember the chaos that followed. While clinicians and researchers confronted a novel virus, insufficient personal protective equipment, and rising patient volumes, communities battled over mandatory lockdowns, masking, and cancelled elective procedures. The initial support for health care workers waned as portions of the public became suspicious of recommended treatments, enthusiastic about unconventional (and sometimes risky) treatments, and skeptical of a brand-new vaccine.¹ The physical and emotional exhaustion that hit health care workers led many to early retirement, leaving behind an understaffed industry with plenty of burnout.

Two years later (but still in the thick of COVID-19 variant surges), the 2022 Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* returned the authority to regulate abortion to individual states, resulting in a drastically varying (and often confusing) landscape of reproductive health care laws across the country.² OBGYNs and emergency medicine clinicians looked to attorneys to help them appropriately treat patients, with each party expressing concerns about increased legal involvement in patient care. While experienced clinicians were unsettled about the uncertain new boundaries for their clinical practices, medical students and residents also experienced a change in their

education, with the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists reporting that almost half of medical students were encountering barriers in their education resulting from their state's restricted access to certain reproductive health care.³

2025 brought federal government attempts to rollback access to gender affirming care for minors through a variety of means—executive orders, subpoenas, cessation of funding, and proposed changes to federal laws governing hospitals participating in Medicare. As a result, some clinicians who provide specialized care to trans patients face conflicting state and federal laws as well as profound professional and ethical conflicts—and these clinicians, too, have looked to attorneys for direction.

Now the health care system is bracing for impending and substantial cuts to Medicaid. The combination of decreased funding, increased federal regulation of specific types of clinical care, increasing vaccine uncertainty from the American public,⁴ and a growing shortage of health care workers means the health care environment is stressed.

What does that mean for the lawyers and other professionals who support these providers? Certainly, we absorb some of that stress and uncertainty for our clients—especially in an emergent patient situation or when you learn a government agency is knocking on their door right now—but as to the future of health care and health law, I'm (still) optimistic.

Across the profession, health care attorneys have helped health care providers navigate a pandemic by monitoring and interpreting the flood of changing emergency regulations and agency guidance, and we helped them stand up telehealth services and understand the parameters of provider relief funds. With the recent pressures on certain types of care, we are helping health care providers understand new clinical restrictions and navigate the resulting patient care issues. And with the impending funding decreases and uncertainties, we are helping think through creative affiliations and other cost-saving ventures. Meanwhile, our life sciences colleagues are supporting providers and researchers who are making important advancements in health care. A recent article headline proclaimed, “After Decades of Misunderstanding, Menopause is Finally Having Its Moment,”⁵ and there have been exciting reports of a landmark pancreatic cancer treatment.⁶ And that painful shingles vaccine I just received promises not only to prevent shingles but to lower my risk of dementia.⁷ Medicine continues to inspire.

I'm determined that as our health care clients and colleagues continue to innovate amongst these many challenges, our health law industry will continue to provide thoughtful and diligent support. And we are well suited to do this because of AHLA. AHLA creates opportunities for connection for all of us in health law. Readers who attended the 2022 Annual Meeting will remember AHLA responding quickly to the just announced *Dobbs* decision by coordinating a time for us to gather and discuss the SCOTUS opinion and its implications. It was amazing to have so many smart legal minds in one room. Importantly, AHLA provides training, education, and mentoring for our earliest career colleagues all the way to our latest career Fellows, whether through the Fundamentals of Health Law conference, the “Top Ten” issue of Health Law Connections magazine, or the beloved “Year in Review” at the Annual Meeting. And AHLA continues to recognize the importance of creating welcoming and accessible professional environments and building a health law community that supports opportunities for all.

I have been fortunate to have had a courtside seat to see the impact of AHLA during my 20+ years in the Association, but especially during my last seven years on AHLA's Women's Leadership Council. Year after year, I watched busy, smart, hardworking women volunteer their time to plan, write, speak,

and mentor for AHLA publications, conferences, and virtual forums. We dove into all aspects of health law and what it means to be part of this important profession, and we proudly partnered with early career professionals who inspire and ensure the future in our profession is bright.

There is much to do about the complex issues affecting health care in our country. But AHLA and its membership will continue to educate, collaborate, and support the advancement of the health law industry.

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- 1 <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/02/12/5-years-later-america-looks-back-at-the-impact-of-covid-19/>
- 2 <https://www.guttmacher.org/2024/05/clear-and-growing-evidence-dobbs-harming-reproductive-health-and-freedom>
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- 4 <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2025/11/18/how-do-americans-view-childhood-vaccines-vaccine-research-and-policy/>
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