

Inspiring Women

Episode 58: Dr. Patrice Harris

Lori McGraw:

Welcome to Inspiring Women with Lori McGraw. I am your host, Lori McGraw. I have spent the past 30 years in leadership, and over the years I've come to learn one thing. Women need women and not just any women, but inspiring women. Tune in every week to hear from women at the pinnacle of their careers and from others who are just starting out. Episodes can be found at inspiringwomen.show or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening. And I hope you will be inspired.

Welcome to this episode of Inspiring Women. And I am so happy to be speaking with Dr. Patrice Harris. She is a private practicing physician. She is experienced as a public health director, and she is well known as a patient advocate. She is also the 174th president of the American Medical Association, the first African American woman to ever hold that position. Now, Dr. Harris' life is marked by her passion to improve the lives of children in the communities around her, especially communities of color. She's a visiting professor of Columbia university, an adjunct professor at Emory, another professor at Morehouse. And she's very accomplished. Today, she is the co-founder and CEO of a digital health company, eMed. And Dr. Harris, I am so happy to be speaking with you today.

Dr. Patrice Harris:

Lori, thank you so much for having me. As I was thinking about this podcast, I was looking back on some old photos, and one of my favorite photos is of you and me and Dr. Barbara McAneny. And I think you have put together a luncheon or an event for women at the AMA. So what an honor to be with you today. I know that you have been an inspiration to me, and you always work to inspire women, so this is a great opportunity.

Lori McGraw:

Well, you're kind and you inspire me. So rather than just gushing on you, let's get started, like we always do on Inspiring Women. And just so I understand, Patrice, what are you doing right now? What is your day to day look like as the CEO and founder of a digital health company?

Dr. Patrice Harris:

Well, it's something new every day, but eMed, as you know, is a digital health company. And we got together to solve problems, some of our nation's greatest health problems. We wanted to use technology and innovation not just to develop a shiny new object, but to really solve problems. And so we were thinking about access and affordability, and COVID hit. And like many, we looked to solve a problem with COVID, and that was access to affordable testing. And so we developed a platform to bring diagnostic testing for COVID at home just to eliminate some of the barriers, transportation, waiting hours in cars rather, time off from work, and bringing the test to people at their homes. So my day to day consists of meeting potential new clients, meeting

with current clients. Currently, as you know, of course, this has always been the case is, there's a lot out of policy and regulation around what we do in healthcare. And so I have a significant portfolio, working on both the federal and state level. And so I'll have meetings with policy makers and regulators. So a day of meetings and a day of journey and discovery, because I'm new to this CEO thing, and I'm certainly learning something new every day.

Lori McGraw:

Well, you may be new to it, but you sound like a veteran. You speak about the company with ease. You talk about the mission and what you're doing. This is new. And your veteran experience comes from advocacy and your long history of being in physician practice and private practice. And along the way, a lot of firsts, a series of firsts, actually. So I wanted to dig into that a little bit, Patrice. As we talk about women on Inspiring Women, breaking new ground is always something that we applaud and it's wonderful, but maybe you could describe for us some of the firsts that you have accomplished. And what were some of the early firsts that you were breaking new barriers at earlier in your career?

Dr. Patrice Harris:

Well, I think the first first, if you will... And I'm sure there are so many in my life that actually, I don't remember because, Lori, I've always been a nose to the grindstone, heads down, get the work done. I have even talked about leadership in that, for me, leadership is not about the position or the title or the corner office. It's about getting the work done. And I was inspired to become a doctor by Marcus Welby. He was a TV doctor, not a woman, but I didn't see many role models before me, but I knew that there was something wonderful and something that fit with Dr. Welby's passion for his patients inside the exam room and outside the exam room. And I didn't know how to get there because I am the first person in my family to go on to medical school.

So there was no roadmap for me, but I have always felt it important to be that roadmap for others. When I was the first in a room, the first in a boardroom, I was the only, in my medical school class... And I wasn't the first African American that had gone to medical school at West Virginia University, but at the time I was there, I was the only African-American man or a woman in my class. Of course, ultimately, again, my career in medicine, through the advocacy side, very involved and engaged at the state level and then at the national level with the American Psychiatric Association and then at the AMA. And I'm the first African-American woman to be chair of the board of the AMA and, as you noted earlier, the first African-American woman to be elected president of the American medical association.

So so often I may not have been the first, but maybe the only and the first in a while in so many of those rooms where decisions were being made. And I've always felt that it's important to be around the decision-making table. And I've also thought it was very important to become engaged and involved if something is not working right. If you see a new path, if you see a company, an organization, an entity that needs a new direction, then for me... And again, that's my a personal choice that's authentic to the way I have always liked to work. Then, I feel obligated to get in and engage and shape the direction of a company, a committee, an organization.

Lori McGraw:

Well, that speaks to what tables you're at, where the important decisions are being made, and you also, clearly, are very comfortable in those environments. But do you feel now that when you are a first or you are a one of few or one of only that you have an extra responsibility? It sounds like, in the early days, it was more nose to the grindstone and you were breaking new ground, or perhaps barriers, without necessarily recognizing perhaps the significance of them. And again, I'm not trying to put words in your mouth, but I'm trying to understand a bit if you reflect on it differently today, at this stage of your career, versus the early days when you were making those progressions.

Dr. Patrice Harris:

That's a good point. And I do a lot of reflection, particularly as I enter a new phase of my work life. But Lori, I always was aware that I was the first and the only, and I have always been aware that what I did, what I said could shape how people behind me, their opportunities. So it is a responsibility, has always been a responsibility. And let me just say, it is not always an easy responsibility knowing that, fair or unfair... And a lot of times, I'm not even sure I use that word, but knowing that what you do again, what you say, your success, any of your failures, sometimes they are magnified if you're African American, the only one in the room, but I willingly took on that responsibility because somebody's got to be the first, right? Somebody has to be the first and then accept the responsibility of being the first. And as I said, if not during my inaugural address, many times during my years, AMA presidency, the job of the first is not to be the last. And so I think that's an important responsibility and one that I continue to shoulder today, which sometimes can be exhausting, but it's just important.

Lori McGraw:

But it's also something to be incredibly proud of. I know, Patrice, we're all proud to be around it, and I also have really appreciated that we all talk about that words matter, but it strikes me that you have had a real appreciation that, yes, words matter and the words that you choose, you're thoughtful about them. And I think that's actually good advice for other people who are wanting to aspire to be in the types of leadership positions that you have certainly achieved. Let's maybe talk about another set of pivots, perhaps. So all this time of practice, advocacy, organized medicine, and now pivoting to digital health, CEO, leading a fast-growing company, first of all, what caught your interest to make such a significant move like this?

Dr. Patrice Harris:

First and foremost, alignment with my personal and professional missions and goals. Towards the end of my presidency at the AMA, people said, "All right, Patrice, what's next for you?" And I decided that whatever was next had to be in alignment with my personal mission statement and goals I already had, of course, issues around equity, health inequities, health, disparities, diversity, certainly mental health, and the importance of mental health into overall health care and children and childhood trauma. And so I was really attracted to some of the folks that were coming together and thinking about again, using technology to solve problems. And that drew me to eMed. And Lori, really the seeds of that happened at the AMA, really, I would say, at the AMA but also in the medical profession.

As you well know, technology has not always been a solve for physicians. And I will say healthcare. It's been, in some ways, a shiny new object. It's been something that may have helped

with billing, but certainly a burden to physicians' everyday practices. And I know that globally because I've been a leader of the AMA and hear from physicians and know physicians' pain points. But I have a personal story to tell, again, about how some of the issues around electronic health records were a burden and did not serve me well in serving my patients. So I left the AMA also with a keen drive to making sure that technology and innovation... At the end of the day, it really wasn't about physicians, but as a physician, certainly I want to be able to do all that I can to serve my patients better. But at the end of the day, improve patient outcomes, not detract from patient care, and in fact, help improve patient care. And so again, my drive to get in there and get involved, not complain from the outside. We've seen and innovation. It's a good thing. There's a lot of promise, but there's a lot of peril. And so I was drawn to eMed because I wanted to make sure that we fulfilled the promise of innovation and technology, and we were intentional about not adding to the peril.

Lori McGraw:

Right. And, like I said before, you sound like a veteran. You didn't just pivot into this new space. You started at the top. So I want to also ask you about... For women, generally speaking, and this has been proven to be true, women tend to want to check all the boxes to feel like they are particularly qualified for a certain position. You moved into this role deeply understanding the impact of technology on the practicing physician, but not having been in this position before. So what leadership experience are you drawing on to be in this new space? Because I personally think that this reality of women needing to check all the boxes inhibits them from having the courage to move forward into spaces that they're well qualified to be in.

Dr. Patrice Harris:

It does inhibit. I agree with you, Lori. And I have to say it inhibited me early on because I, at various times, thought that I had to have a degree in this in order to do this, or I have to have 20 years of experience in order to do something new. But one of the things that I have learned over the years is your experience in one area can certainly translate into a new area. And the leadership experience I've had, the opportunity to look at balance sheets and financial records as a chair of the finance committee of the American Medical Association. I have to even say, Lori, my training in psychiatry. And I say that with a little bit of trepidation, because people are always a little worried that psychiatrists are analyzing them, but I will just say, separate and apart from that, and that's not happening, but I think my training has helped me understand people.

And, at the end of the day, when you lead an organization, an organization is made of people. And I think that the understanding of people, candidly, make psychiatrists, I think, great leaders. So I think my professional training, my ability to work through the politics of several organizations, including the AMA, and of course work through the politics of getting legislation passed, working with our congressmen and women at the state and local level, my advocacy experience, understanding that lessons like live to fight another day and you don't have to be right, but you do want to win. So I think women should would say and know that you don't have to have this sometimes imaginary set of criteria to do something different. Draw upon your past experiences and just say yes.

Lori McGraw:

Well, it's also great to hear you talk about just being reflective. So the comments that you're making are also instructive, I think, in terms of being reflective on how different experiences anyone has had can be applied to a new situation. And so I really appreciate those comments. So we're recording this at Help, and they have this great podcast area, podcast recording. We're not actually recording it there. This is a really fun and dynamic and pretty jazzy conference. So in the world of first, this is one of the first times that we have so many people coming together again. I know this isn't your first health conference, Patrice, but what are you seeing out there? What is catching your eye in terms of the new fast-moving pace of technology and innovation in healthcare?

Dr. Patrice Harris:

Well, the first thing I would say is clearly people are glad to get back together. Now, there is no question, and of course this is a tech conference, that technology has enabled us to stay connected during the time of the pandemic. But we are by nature social creatures, and while certainly connection by technology has been great, it is always helpful to get in the room and see people, have those connections, those conversations, even break bread together. And so we've certainly been able to do that at Help. We're able to hear new ideas. One of the things I've always amplified is we have to be careful not to get in our own bubbles. And I will just say as a physician, but any group, you tend to get in your own bubble and have conversations with people who may have gone through similar experiences and have similar training.

And so it's always good to hear different perspectives. I think that diversity and thought of opinion is very good. And in so many industries, stakeholders are here, Lori, as you know, and that is, I think, the way we've needed to think about healthcare for a long time, right? I think for so long it's traditional health and healthcare. It's a doctor, it's a hospital, it's other healthcare professionals, and that's it. And actually, COVID has amplified this in addition to accelerating acceptance of the use of technology. However, with that acceptance does come a responsibility for trusted technology and confidence in technology and... But here people can think about that together. We can share that it is great to innovate, but let's make sure we're solving problems and privacy and confidentiality. And there are so many healthcare stakeholders that are critical. It's great to hear from Merck because they have upcoming and under review right now a new medication on the treatment side and the vaccine side. We've heard people talk about equity a lot at this conference. So I think all of these things are interconnected and interrelated, and we need to continue to be about the business of, what I call, not only silo busting, but integrating. And health provides a great opportunity to do that, and networking as well.

Lori McGraw:

Well, there is an incredible amount of energy here. I absolutely agree with you. And I've been to many, many conferences like this over the years in the healthcare technology space, but I would just state it's very different. And the level of boldness of what the new innovation opportunities are is striking to me. And perhaps that is very much related to what the pandemic gave us witness to in terms of how quickly things can be accelerated when they have to be, but we'll see what comes of it. How are you feeling about separating out what's real, where the opportunities really lie, versus what is hype?

Dr. Patrice Harris:

That is a challenge, Lori, and I'm always hypervigilant about that because it's okay to be disruptive, right? But when it comes to healthcare... And this is my own bias, and people can let me know what they think about this. It's not that I'm, again, anti-disruption, but when it comes to healthcare, it's not the same as a tech product, right, a new phone or a new gadget. It's about lives and people's health. And if we don't get it right, people could die. I mean, that sounds a little bit hyperbolic and, you know me, I'm not hyperbolic, but that's how I think about this. So I think that we should disrupt, but I say disrupt with care.

Lori McGraw:

Yeah. You have been so consistent in those comments. Every time we have talked about technology, your consistency, in terms of focus on what the results are for patients and the importance of that, has been very, very clear. I've always appreciated that. Let's just bring this back around, Patrice, to you. And as a woman who's broken many barriers, ground in different levels of incredible leadership, for all these accolades, you talk about sometimes it can be exhausting. So how do you stay sharp? How do you stay energized? Where does your energy come from?

Dr. Patrice Harris:

I think it's staying, first of all, connected with why I'm doing the work in the first place, because yes, it does require, and all of us have to do this in different ways, putting on that armor knowing that you're going into battle, knowing that there will be those who get up in the morning to make sure you fail, knowing, again, that there are those who don't think you belong in the room and discount you the second you walk in the room. So in order to maintain in those surroundings and in that environment, I stay connected with others I know, or I find my support. I wake up, again, every day with the mission and an expression of gratitude that I can fight the fight. I know I'm fighting the fight for others who don't have the privilege of speaking out, don't have the privilege of being in those rooms where decisions are made that affect the healthcare for a lot of people.

So I think it's staying connected, although Lori, and this is a work in progress, let me admit that self-care is important. And I don't always do that as much as I should, but I tell people to make sure that we are spending some time and putting some energy... And women need to do this. I don't have to say this, I'm sure, but I will just say it. I think women need to make sure we are at the top of our to-do list because for so many women, we put ourselves at the bottom of our to-do list. So we need to do that and use whatever resources, coping skills, mechanisms we have to take care of ourselves.

Lori McGraw:

Yeah. I think that is terrific. One last fun question before we close out, Patrice. And in terms of reading, any books or things that you might recommend that have been particularly meaningful to you?

Dr. Patrice Harris:

Well, there was one article... And actually, I learned this through women mentors at the AMA. And I think it was an article. It wasn't a book, but this was so meaningful for me. And Lori, you may know it. It was Women Don't Ask, because I went through the early part of my life not asking, sometimes even not believing that I deserve, but not asking for the things that I wanted.

And so I remember that was an aha moment for me is that I should ask for what I want. I should be bold about what I want, and I should have the faith that I am deserving of what I asked for. So that was an important article and aha moment for me.

Lori McGraw:

That's great. As we close out here, there's been such a great discussion, Patrice, any last words of wisdom or advice that you might give to other aspiring women?

Dr. Patrice Harris:

Well, I would say, in addition to developing a sister circle, whatever that means... And by the way, men can be in your sister circle, or I should probably say your circle of support, but I think make sure you have that circle of support and be authentic. It's not any of our goal to be someone else. We should know who we are, be our authentic selves, and move forward from that place and space of authenticity. I know, for me, early on, I thought "Well, I want to do exactly what Dr. X is doing." And then I realized that you can integrate and incorporate good things that other people are doing, but you still have to incorporate that into who you truly are. So I would say, at the end of the day, be authentic.

Lori McGraw:

That is fantastic advice. This has been an incredible conversation. I so appreciate it, Patrice. And we have been speaking to Dr. Patrice Harris on Inspiring Women. And Patrice, thank you so much.

Dr. Patrice Harris:

Thank you, Lori, my pleasure.

Lori McGraw:

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