



Na Leo Ola

Newsletter of the Hawaii Medical Association

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Mele Kalikimaka Hau'oli Makahiki Hou

As we welcome in 2025, we look back on a year filled with great accomplishments and challenges. We are so grateful for your membership. Thank you for belonging to the HMA 'ohana.

HMA Member Profile

Ka'ohimanu L.K. Dang Akiona, MD

NLO *Tell us a little bit about your medical journey.*

KDA After graduating from Kamehameha, I went to UH Manoa and pursued concurrent degrees in cellular & molecular biology and Hawaiian studies /natural environment. I was planning to pursue a PhD but was encouraged by community and health navigators to consider medicine. I attended University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine with support from the Native Hawaiian Health Scholarship Program and returned home as one of the first residents in the Hawai'i Island Family Medicine Residency Program in Hilo. I was the program's first chief resident and continued on to support the residency, then our Ka'u hospital & clinic. I left the state system to support Native Hawaiian Health Systems on Hawaii Island and Maui. I worked with the Lieutenant Governor on homelessness projects, and he referred me to Dr. Scott Miscovich; I joined his practice in 2019. After being mentored under Dr. Miscovich and implementing some amazing county, state and national COVID- and primary care - related operations, I started a practice of my own in 2022 and in May 2023 we opened a branch on Moloka'i to address the severe gap in care there.

NLO *Growing up, was medicine ever a career choice?*

KDA Initially, I was told medicine was maybe too hard a road to take, especially for Native Hawaiians and I witnessed (family experiences) clear examples of poor care. I got to understand it more intimately when my research focus transitioned from bench to patient care /coordination

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President's Message

by Elizabeth Ann Ignacio, MD, FSIR, FACP



HMA has had a colorful 2024 year full of hard work, instructive educational programming, strong collaborative efforts and spirited advocacy.

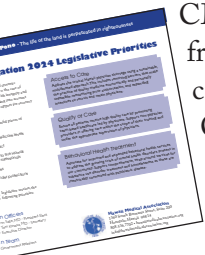
Hawaii physicians have fought tirelessly to provide high quality and safe care, despite critical workforce shortages and diminished resources. Through 2024, our doctors have borne witness to the incredible resilience of our patients despite unrelenting barriers to healthcare access, the profound losses of the Maui wildfires, and suffering of health conditions under extreme poverty in rural and underserved areas.

Together, HMA physicians have proposed and supported solutions that address flaws in Hawaii healthcare. Our three major legislative priorities for 2024 were Access to Care, Quality of Care,

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2024 - A Look Back

- **JANUARY** 2024 legislative priorities set. Legislature opens. CME concentrating on PTSD from Maui wildfires, Maui care update and current COVID considerations. State of Reform Health Policy Conference.



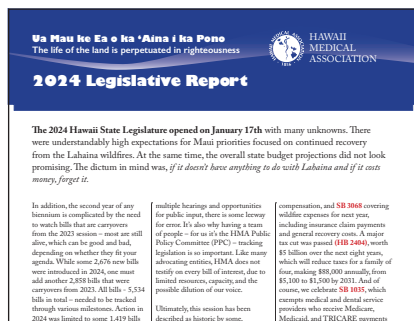
- **FEBRUARY** Conversations at HMA with Clay Kekina re: Nitta case. Legislative updates – HB2544 and HB1675 pass finance committee, SB1035 in limbo. Dr. Robert Santry of Maui passes. Maui wildfire continues to be main topic in headlines.

- **MARCH** HB1675 continues to make progress, as does HB1836. HCR182 is proposed in response to greater attention on prior authorization. Behavioral health sees SB3139 and complementary HB1831 move to final hearings.



- **APRIL** CE@HMA covers topics on Health Disparities and Equity, Neurosurgery, and a history and look forward for JABSOM. Emphasis turns to SB1035, asking members to submit testimony. Petition created for SB1035 support. HMA and HDA publish editorial in support of SB1035.

- **MAY** Legislature closes. SB1035 passed. Legislative report published.



- **JUNE** SB1035 signed into law by Governor Green. Dr. Angela Pratt receives Outstanding Mother of the Year award from American Lung Association. Conversations at HMA speaks with Dr. Geri Young and Dr. Angela Gough from Pu'u Lu Lapa'au, concentrating on physician wellness. HMA representatives attend AMA annual meeting.



- **JULY** CE@HMA includes state of JABSOM, Microplastics, lessons learned from physicians serving in Gaza, Deflection and Diversion in mental health issues. HMA hosts welcome event for new JABSOM Dean T. Sam Shomaker. HMA recognizes passing of Rep.



Mark Nakashima, who received first Manawale'a Community

- **AUGUST** HMAConnect does interview with Emily Carroll from AMA's Advocacy Department, regarding prior authorization.



- **SEPTEMBER** HMA members Dr. Jerris Hedges and Dr. Samuel Birer speak at the Hawaii Book and Music Festival. Motion for Leave with proposed Amicus Brief filed by HMA and AMA. Elections held for 2025 HMA leadership positions.

- **OCTOBER** Ola Pono Ike held on October 19 at the Hilton Hawaiian Village. HMA Awards: Whitney Limm, Physician of the Year; Tom Kosasa, Lifetime Achievement; John Henry Felix, Manawale'a Community Service Award. Nonprofit grant awardees: JABSOM



HOME project, Ohana Medical Mission, NAMI Hawaii. Transfer of Appeal granted in Nitta vs. HMSA case. Dr. Angela Pratt chairs 2024 Komen Walk. Dr. Michael Champion is Honorary Chair of 2024 NAMI Walk. 2024 HMA annual meeting held on October 19.

- **NOVEMBER** Conversations at HMA convenes roundtable to discuss psychotropic medications and thyroid screening. HMA representatives attend AMA interim meeting in Orlando, FL.

- **December:** Preparing for 2025 legislative session by polling members for priorities. Also polled members for 2025 HMA Awards. Date for Ola Pono Ike 2025 set for October 25, 2025 at the Hilton Hawaiian Village, Coral Ballroom, 5:00 p.m.



Executive Director's Message *by Marc Alexander*



As 2024 ends, many of us are reflecting on the past year and looking forward to what 2025 will bring. One of the major victories led by HMA in 2024 was the successful passage of **General Excise Tax reform in SB 1035**. This bill was passed unanimously by both chambers of the Hawaii State Legislature and signed by Governor Josh Green, MD, on June 3, 2024, becoming **Act 47**. The measure exempts hospitals, infirmaries, medical clinics, health care facilities, pharmacies, and medical and dental providers from General Excise Tax on goods and services reimbursed through Medicare, Medicaid, or TRICARE. This change is significant for both physicians and those accessing Medicare, Medicaid (Med-QUEST in Hawaii), and TRICARE. It is estimated to save healthcare providers approximately \$74 million annually once it takes effect on January 1, 2026. This will remove a major impediment in caring for the underserved community. Med-QUEST includes approximately 406,000 enrollees as of December 2024. This vulnerable population, a major segment of Hawaii's 1.4 million population, will benefit from private practice physicians and dentists not having to pay the GET. Approximately 300,000 of Hawaii's people are on Medicare, and they will also benefit from increased access. Private practice physicians and dentists will now be treated the same as non-profit healthcare providers who have long been exempted from GET. The bill was introduced by Hawaii Island Senator **Lorraine Inouye** and shepherded by another Hawaii Island Senator and chair of the Senate Committee on Health and Human Services, Senator **Joy San Buenaventura**, along with other

key leaders in both the senate and house. HMA joined with the Hawaii Dental Association, neighbor island advocates, and others in newspaper editorials, testimonies, petitions, and grassroots lobbying. The senate press release, Governor Green at the signing ceremony, and newspaper editorials in support of the bill all referenced HMA directly.

After decades of working on this issue without success, what led to this victory? No one has all the answers. However, political and community leadership, true collaboration (e.g., physicians and dentists), a focus on patients and community access to care, willingness to compromise (e.g., implementation isn't immediate), respect and fairness, and steady education each contributed to the positive outcome. Other successes have a similar formula, including the **Healthcare Education Loan Repayment Program (HELP)** successfully championed by Governor Green and the John A. Burns School of Medicine.

The lessons learned from this formula can serve us well as we tackle other complex issues in the healthcare arena, including prior authorization reform, caring for our aging population, disparities in Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander health, access to mental health services, and the implementation of artificial intelligence and other technologies. It's easy to become a cynic about the political process and even pessimistic about our community's future. However, I'm not one of those, and neither are the many who helped to make healthcare better in 2024. I believe the prospects for 2025 and beyond are bright if we continue to focus on moving forward together.

President's Message

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and Behavioral Health Treatment. With legislative successes that include passage of SB 1035 - the GET exemption for medical services - and HB 2393 regarding mammography, we are grateful to our engaged and committed HMA physician advocates. Legislative successes would not be possible without the collaborative efforts of partners such as the John A. Burns School of Medicine, the Hawaii/Pacific Basin Area Health Education Center, the Hawaii State Rural Health Association, the Hawaii Provider Shortage Crisis Task Force, and the Hawaii Dental Association.

In 2024 we were also able to come together at Ola Pono Ike and celebrate the amazing leadership, exceptional hard work and outstanding community service of Dr. Whitney M.L. Limm, Dr. Thomas S. Kosasa and Dr. John Henry Felix. We enjoyed time together and honored these three individuals who embody the aloha spirit by going above and beyond to serve Hawaii.

HMA physicians possess a wondrous diversity of culture and ideologies, and our combined forces yield positive impact. Our unity is power. Together we can navigate through turbulent times and advocate for meaningful change. In 2025, HMA will continue this important work. We have courage. We are hopeful. We remain true to our mission and strong in our commitment to our patient 'ohana and the incredible Hawaii physicians who serve and care for them.

HMA Member Profile

Ka'ohimanu L.K. Dang Akiona, MD

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and gaps in care delivery. I had intentionally gone into laboratory research and planned to do clinical and translational research as a career but in 2006, I was given the opportunity to create a training curriculum for Cancer Patient Navigators in Hawaii. We successfully laid the groundwork for cancer/care navigators and later community health workers - training many amazing individuals statewide and from the South Pacific. Several of these navigators actually encouraged me to reconsider medicine.

I continued research for a while, then left for medical school in 2009. Many of those community navigators kept in touch throughout the long journey to my current clinical practice.

NLO *What are you most proud of in your medical career? Conversely, what frustrates you the most about the profession?*

KDA I am proud of the steady, small gains we have made in access to care and awareness of the gaps in care at all levels. Whether through my work in street medicine, advocating for access to COVID resources or providing care in innovative ways, I am most proud of the team around me that truly believes, as I do, that access to good care is key. This is also incidentally what most frustrates me / drives me to keep going; the chasm between the care we think / hope / believe is being provided and what is actually being provided is widening and so it's become a more crucial aspect of my job - making sure we are all aware of the realities of rural care, especially for our neighbor islands.

NLO *Any hobbies, interests, pastimes outside of medicine?*

KDA I enjoy reading, running, boxing, Lyra aerial arts, and sports; playing and watching soccer, football, etc. I

am new to the "relaxing" thing but am trying my best to occasionally just enjoy calm and quiet moments with family and friends. My daughter is my favorite person to spend time with - she

has been accompanying me to work since she was born. Her compassion and kindness truly makes my heart happy. Oh, and we have a silly dog named Mochi Libre.

NLO *Family life: where did you grow up: Anything you'd like to share about your childhood, family life, then and now?*

KDA I grew up in Wahiawa / Haleiwa / Mililani. My family comes from humble backgrounds, worked hard, believed in the value of education, and service to our community. My parents had me young, I am the oldest of their three children. I was lucky to spend a lot of time with my grandparents and great-grandparents though my maternal grandmother, who passed at the young age of 48 from metastatic colon cancer



Dr. Akiona practicing aerial arts for "relaxation"

(I was eight). My great grandmother - a full Hawaiian from Hana - was Lydia Leinani Kaulula'au (I'm named after her) is still alive and will be 100 years old. It's sometimes really sobering and amazing to reflect on what she lived through and what I've been fortunate enough to build and accomplish just a few generations later.

NLO *Any wishes for our state re: healthcare?*

KDA I am optimistic that we can make incremental changes to improve the state of healthcare but this will take us all being able to look critically at our current state - the good, the bad, and the puka. It will take efforts from all sides (patients, payors, leaders, providers, etc.) at all levels (individual to community to systems) for lasting change

to happen. But I truly believe that the one most impactful aspect is



Dr. Akiona and daughter Auli'i

improving ACCESS TO PRIMARY CARE. I do believe there are ways to address our needs without sacrificing

quality, safety, or equity but it will require listening more closely to the voices of those serving - the providers on the front lines.



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