n November 2018, I was honored to be elected to the state Senate. From the start of this time in public service, my long career in the medical field has helped inform and guide my work as a state legislator. I am an otolaryngologist, and was in medical practice as an ear, nose and throat doctor for more than 40 years before my medical partner and I closed our ENT practice in 2019.

Through the years, too, I have been in various positions to see the important connections between medical care and public policy — for example, as president of the Michigan State Medical Society and as a member of the Council of State Governments' Healthy States Task Force.

There is reason to have hope here in Michigan, as well as across the nation and the world. Along with other medical professionals in Michigan, I have joined the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in advising that everyone wear face coverings in public to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. This practice offers some protection against infection and unknowingly spreading the virus if you are asymptomatic. A YouTube video titled “A Doctor Explains How to Make the Safest Face Mask” shows how to make a very efficient mask out of a new high Efficiency Particulate Air vacuum cleaner bag.

Sharing resources like these with our constituents is one way we as legislators can aid in our states’ public health response. In addition, recently I have been encouraged by a promising drug in the fight against COVID-19. Dr. Edward Loniewski is an orthopedic surgeon in Michigan who has been doing some trials on stem cells with a group out of Seattle called AVM Biotechnology. AVM’s founder and lead researcher, Dr. Theresa Deisher, along with her team, has been working on a medicine labeled AVM0703. The drug is reported to turn one’s own immune system on; as of April, it was in trials to obtain U.S. Food and Drug Administration approval for use in this pandemic. AVM0703 is a more highly purified form of dexamethasone, a generic medication that is currently available. Doctors are using this generic medicine in many of the patients currently being treated for their COVID-19 infections, especially when they are hospitalized. Doctors typically give dexamethasone, or other steroids, in very small doses over an extended period of time.

To get the drug into stem cells for the immune system, one very large dose must be given orally or by feeding tube in the form of tablets dissolved in orange juice, according to one of the researchers. Dexamethasone was developed in the late 1950s and came to market in the early 1960s. It has side effects, mainly minor, and is approved by the FDA for use by doctors now, even in the higher dosages required to trigger the immune system response. If you have family members who are very sick with the coronavirus, please consider asking your doctors to consider this approach, or to consider using some other “off label” medicines. Please consult with your doctor about different options.

LEGISLATION TO HELP SMALL PHARMACIES

As we continue to work on our response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there also is room for new policies that help improve access to overall access to needed care and medications. That is the intent of SB 630, a bill that I introduced in the fall to create a long-lasting, positive impact on my state. This bill would create a new category of medical licensure in Michigan for wholesale distributor-brokers of prescription drugs — a category distinct from wholesale distributors. Wholesale drug distributors are intended to serve as a link in the pharmaceutical and medical device supply chain. These distributors purchase medicines and/or medicines directly from manufacturers for storage in warehouses and distribution centers across the country. From there, licensed pharmacies, hospitals and medical providers place orders with the wholesale distributors for the medicines and devices they need. The distributors process and deliver the orders.

Under SB 630, a licensed wholesale distributor-broker would have the statutory authority to facilitate the delivery or trade of a drug or device between pharmacies for the purpose of filling a prescription for a specific patient. The wholesale distributor-broker would not take physical possession or ownership of the drug or device.

The Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs has recently determined that, despite prior licensure, the statutory definition of pharmacy wholesaler does not include or encompass this type of facilitation. SB 630 would fill this gap in our state statute.

This type of broker facilitation is particularly useful in supporting smaller pharmacies. They need to secure medication for their customers in smaller lots, a difficult task due to supply-chain constraints.

“The creation of this new category of licensure in Michigan will foster continued access to needed medications during this pandemic and in the future,” Johny Kello, the CEO of MatchRx (a web-based marketplace used by many independent pharmacies), recently said about the bill. As of April, SB 630 had passed out of committee and was awaiting action on the Senate floor.