“They took away our thank yous!” My friend, a primary care physician, was furious. Administrators had programmed her clinic’s electronic health record system to hide every message from patients that read, “Thank you.” My friend protested, explaining that these short expressions of gratitude were meaningful to her. Not only did the administrators refuse to budge, but a few days later, they announced triumphantly to her practice group that they had reduced the number of incoming messages by a few percentage points.

Alas, the case of the disappearing thank you is not limited to clinical medicine. In health policy, where the news about gaps in coverage, care, and equity are ever present, there is little time and space for appreciation of what has been accomplished.

Recent headlines have highlighted the millions of children losing Medicaid coverage, the increasing cost of health insurance, and the rising rates of cardiovascular disease. These are all important stories, but they are rarely balanced by positive coverage of policy efforts. Several months ago, The New York Times reported that Medicare costs had stabilized, representing $3.9 trillion in savings for the federal government compared with previous spending projections. Numerous laws and regulations, including the Affordable Care Act, contributed to this success, but other media have barely covered this story, and few individuals in the US are aware of it or understand its importance.

Similarly, there is scant attention paid to important public health work occurring every day, from efforts to establish comprehensive suicide prevention programs, to investigations that uncover the cause of bacterial-resistant infections, to coordinated efforts to improve birth outcomes. A decade-long initiative in my hometown of Baltimore, Maryland, has brought infant mortality to record lows while reducing racial disparities, but it would be hard to find someone outside Baltimore who has heard of this successful program.

Good news is hard to find these days. In a world dominated by social media, headlines with negative terms generate more clicks. With trust in government at near record lows, there is a large appetite for narratives that color public officials as corrupt or incompetent.

What are the consequences when the public does not learn about programs and policies that have advanced health and saved lives? Without ongoing and widespread reporting of successful initiatives, it becomes easier to undo them. An example in which a vital and successful program has largely gone unnoticed by the US public and is now at risk is the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) program. This public health program is estimated to have saved more than 25 million lives over the last 20 years. Experts recently called PEPFAR “as close to a ‘perfect’ model of health care delivery and goodwill from the US towards international health concerns developed to date.” Yet according to a recent survey from the Bipartisan Policy Center, 52% of individuals in the US had never heard of PEPFAR, another 17% said “I know the name, but nothing about it,” and another 16% said, “I know at least something about it, but I’m not very familiar with it.” Just 15% understood PEPFAR well.

Into this information vacuum have stepped some conservative politicians who claim erroneously that the PEPFAR program promotes abortion. As a result of this discord, Congress failed to reauthorize the program on time, leaving a cloud over its future.

Political battles over foundational policies for insurance coverage and childhood vaccinations are looming. Without appreciating the dramatic decrease in the number of individuals in the US without health insurance or the many thousands of lives saved through vaccination, will signature

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achievements for the health of individuals in the US continue? Just a few years ago, in 2017, public confusion over the Affordable Care Act facilitated efforts that nearly succeeded in repealing the landmark law.

A failure to appreciate past victories can also jeopardize efforts to tackle the health challenges of the future. Trust and confidence in government and public officials, from national political parties to local agencies, is declining. Lower levels of trust were associated with worse outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not a stretch to see that a trust deficit threatens the ability to respond effectively to long-term threats such as climate change.

Reminding people of the effectiveness of yesterday’s smart policy decisions can rebuild confidence and faith that action taken today to protect future generations will make a difference. The progress made in clean air and water should be ballast for efforts to reduce carbon emissions. The effectiveness of efforts to redesign certain health care payment models should encourage more ambitious attempts to control costs and improve health outcomes.

Remembering past success can have a near-term effect on the people working every day to protect health and save lives. Just like my clinician friend who smiles whenever she receives a “thank you,” many in health policy and public health may need appreciation as fuel to keep going.

The last few years have been brutal for those working in health agencies at every level, with widespread harassment, firings, and even violence. It is a natural inclination when faced with such attacks to limit exposure by retreating into silence. But it is far better for agencies to start talking about the invisible work of food safety, tobacco control, and other bread-and-butter efforts that make communities healthier. Efforts to reinforce the foundational capabilities of public health are drawing support in states across the political spectrum and even leading to new investments in infrastructure. Now would be a good time to celebrate the frontline workers whose commitment to health has made a difference for their communities.

Of course, it is possible to overdo a “thank you.” It can be tempting to overstate the value of previous efforts, and in the process, unintentionally reduce the urgency of action today. The message of “I appreciate you” should never become “Mission accomplished.”

Rather the goal should be to strike a more sustainable balance between the past, present, and future. All bad news all of the time does not constitute a nutritious information diet. Remembering and even celebrating past triumphs can provide sustenance for the difficult work of advancing equity and protecting health.

After all, as my clinician friend told me, it only takes a moment to read a thank you, but that moment can nurture the strength and resolve to move forward. In 2024, let us give her—and all of us—back our thank yous.