

A Call To Arms: Getting Involved In Advocacy

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I first became formally involved in advocacy efforts in 2003 when I participated in a new training program offered by the American Academy of Neurology. Through the legacy of Dr. Donald Palatucci, the Academy started the **Palatucci Advocacy and Leadership Forum (PALF)** to encourage and train members to become more involved in advocating for our patients and our profession. In fact, many physician societies are getting involved in advocacy and offering these types of programs to their members. When I attended the four-day training session, I didn't know what I was in for or where it would lead. I wasn't really sure what it meant to advocate for my patients.

Over the past seven years I have remained involved in PALF, which has evolved into an award-winning program for the AAN. I have visited with legislators on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, and on Smith Hill in Providence. I have testified before committee hearings on bills. I have been interviewed for and written articles about legislative issues. I have been appointed as co-chair of the Academy's newly developed Government Relations Committee and have helped the Academy develop legislative policy and further the advocacy efforts started in 2003. It has been exciting and very rewarding and is a vital part of our profession.

Now with dramatic changes happening in health care it is more important than ever that physicians get involved in the process. The pendulum is swinging towards a focus on cost-cutting. We can bring to the table the focus on quality and on patient-centered processes and assure that the pendulum doesn't swing too far away.

So how can physicians get involved? The easiest and most common way is to belong to an organization—AMA, RIMS, ACP, AAFP, AAN, ACOG, etc. Just as the AAN did with PALF, most of these organizations have developed their advocacy efforts and have become involved in legislative affairs in order to have their members voices heard. These organiza-

tions represent a special interest group and advocate for their members as a whole. What do Family Physicians want with regard to tort reform, or coding, or licensure? The larger the group, the more clout it will carry among legislative bodies. A group that represents 35,000 physician interests may mean more than a group that represent 3,500 or 500. In politics, legislators always worry about numbers because that is how they get elected. If they take a position on an issue and 51% of the voters agree with them, they are more likely to get re-elected. If 51% are against them, the other candidate might win. They are not usually there to do "the right thing". This is how lobbying works. Special interest groups meet with legislators and tell them what they (or their organization's members) think they should do. If they hear enough about the issue from their constituents then they will usually vote the way the voters want. Legislators who don't risk, defeat at the polls.

The down side to Societies is that they have to represent all of their member's viewpoints. While there are things that everyone would agree on—better reimbursement for services—there are issues where agreement may be less solid. The AMA came across this in 2009 when lobbying congress regarding the recent health care reform bills. Members had differing opinions on some of the specifics of the bills being introduced. Questions arose as to whether a bill should be supported if it didn't contain any meaningful malpractice reform ("tort reform"). Some members thought it shouldn't ever be supported and others felt equally strongly that it should be supported as long as it had other meaningful fixes in it.

So what can you do if your organization isn't working on the issue you want or doesn't represent your viewpoint on an issue? The wonderful thing about our government is that even as individuals we have access to our legislators and have the ability to get our opinions heard. There are many ways that individuals can get involved. We can walk into our legislator's office and tell them what we think. We can host "house parties" or

educational meetings for friends, colleagues, and family and educate them on an issue and then provide supplies or web access to write letters to congress members. We can post information in our offices to educate patients on the issues that we face and supply them with contact information for their legislators. We can attend public forums or "town hall meetings" hosted by politicians and share our point of view. We can write a letter to the editor in response to recent issues or topics or write an Op-Ed piece to express an opinion. Many Society websites offer resources on how to write editorials and get them published. I had a colleague in Louisiana who wrote an article regarding the primary care bonus in the current health care legislation and then sent it out via email to the local and regional newspapers and got it published. Try pitching your story to the media – TV or radio. They are always interested in stories with personal interest or that have a local angle on national stories. Be sure your facts are correct and think about "why this is news" and "why should they care". Be familiar with the arguments against your issue and address those as well. The worst thing that can happen is that they will say no or not be interested.

If you haven't ever done anything like this, how do you start? First think about the issue you are concerned with. Develop an argument and talking points so you know what you are going to say. It may be easiest to start with an issue that your organization is already working on. Most organizations have an Advocacy or Legislative Issues section on their websites. Often they will already have developed talking points or letters you might need. Then you can contact your legislators. Contacting State and Federal legislators is simple. You can find your State legislators on www.rilin.state.ri.us. This website gives you contacts for legislators as well as bills they are working on. Federal legislators can be found online at www.usa.gov and look at the top for "Contact Elected Officials" or you can call the US Capitol Switchboard at 202-

224-3121 and ask for your senator's or representative's office.

When you call an office you will get a staff person and are not likely to speak with the member. Let the person answering the phone know the general issue you are calling about (i.e. health care reform, Medicare reimbursements, etc) and s/he will transfer you to the appropriate staffer. Usually this is a legislative aide who knows as much about the issues as the member of congress (perhaps more). Be sure to identify yourself with your name and title, but they will also want to know that you are a constituent (you can vote for or against them!). Tell them where you live. If you are calling about a specific bill you can give that information as well. Remember that bills are referred to by a number and either HR# (House) or S# (Senate). Ask if they have a position on the issue/bill and if they will support you. Offer to send them more information if they are unfamiliar with the issue or topic or express interest in what you are telling them.

You can also contact members through letters. These days e-mail is probably more effective than letters through "snail-mail". This is due to security measures which most routine mail goes through before it reaches the offices. Security measures often include scanning and irradiation. This process can delay mail for some time. It can also mean that the letters are quite brittle or even hard to read by the time they get to the offices. E-mail is faster, easier, and just as important as routine letters through the mail. A comment through e-mail is weighed the same as a comment through a letter. Many organizations are using e-mail alert systems sent out to members or set up on their websites. The AMA and other organizations frequently have Action Alert systems where they e-mail their members on an issue and provide links for them to write their member of Congress. There is nothing wrong with using pre-formed e-letters. The importance of contacting members is not necessarily the details of what is said, but how many constituents contacted them. The correspondence is received and logged in as for or against an issue and not necessarily read for details.

It is important to show respect for the member of congress by addressing them correctly. Both Senators and Representatives are always addressed in writing as "The Honorable (full name)". In person a member of the Senate is referred to as "Senator" and a member of the House as "Representative". Committee chairs can be addressed as "Mr. Chairman" or "Madam Chairwoman" and the Speaker of the House as "Mr./Madam Speaker". It is important to always be respectful even if you disagree on an issue. There will be another issue in the future that perhaps you will agree on.

All members of congress have staff and it is important to know whom you are talking to. Depending on how senior the member is they may have a large or small staff. Many offices have Legislative Assistants (LA) who deal with a particular area such as a Health LA who will deal with all health care issues. These people will make recommendations to the member on the pros and cons of the issue and give feedback on what voters have been saying. While it is exciting to speak directly with members of congress they are often very busy. The LAs generally handle phone calls and meetings. In my meetings on Capitol Hill, I have found that the more productive ones are often those where the member is not present. Members don't usually like conflict so they will keep the discussion on generalities or small talk, whereas the LA will ask specific questions and sometimes offer insight into what is going on legislatively and what the member's position is on the issue.

Politics is a long-term proposition. Things don't move quickly in the legislative realm. It is often useful to build relationships with members of congress so that you can continue to work together on future issues. The more contact you have with the office the easier it will be in the future to be heard. You may also become a resource for that office so that if an issue comes up they may reach out to you for information.

When talking to others about our issues, it is important to keep in mind how it affects the population at large. It will carry more weight to argue that you will be improving patient care, improving quality, or saving the system money rather than arguing that your salary has been declining. The perception is that physicians are handsomely paid; to go in and complain about decreasing profits won't carry much weight. If you can show them how things will affect your patients (and their constituents) you will have a much stronger argument and be more successful.

It is very important for physicians to get more involved in the legislative process. We are the experts on patient care and needs. While legislation and politics are complex processes they are the system our country has for governing. It is exciting to have a voice in that process. I encourage health care providers to jump in and get involved.

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Disclosure of Financial Interests of author and/or spouse/ significant other

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