

Roles for Medical Students in the Political Process

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ALTHOUGH PHYSICIANS COMPRISE FEWER THAN 2% OF MEMBERS OF CONGRESS, some of today's most controversial political issues affect physician education, training, and practice, in addition to the public health. These issues include tort reform, abortion, bioterrorism, therapeutic and reproductive cloning, global warming, Medicare/Medicaid reform, and universal health coverage. The obstacles preventing medical students from eventually pursuing a political career are numerous; virtually all physicians who currently serve elected or appointed federal positions have had to sacrifice their clinical practice.

Nevertheless, the effect of the political process on medical students remains pervasive. In the medical school application process, candidates may be asked to express their opinions on various political issues.¹ However, after matriculation, the demands of medical curriculum leave little time for political involvement. Political education, advocacy, and activism are often sidelined to extracurricular organizations. Recently, there has been a call for addition of classes on professionalism to the medical curriculum, and with it, inclusion of public health advocacy.²

This issue of MSJAMA explores how medical students can contribute to political discourse and are affected by the outcome of political legislation. Makeba Williams discusses how physicians and medical students in Massachusetts were able to influence legislative policy through the state ballot initiative. Alexander Tsai addresses pharmaceutical company gift giving practices and legislation aimed at curbing their influence on medical trainees. Finally, Angel Foster, Jane van Dis, and Jody Steinauer discuss legislation affecting medical trainees' access to abortion training.

Physicians and medical students are in a unique position to contribute to informed debates on critical issues affecting the practice of medicine and ways of ensuring access to health care through economic reform. Because of our specialized knowledge of public health, we may even be obligated to do so.

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