

Can Dermatologists Influence the Political Process?

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Can dermatologists influence the political process? This age-old question raises its head when things are happening that we do not like or that we believe could be done better. Even though dermatologists have skills and expertise that allow us to be effective in our medical practice, most of us feel incompetent when it comes to dealing with the government. The political process is not the primary focus of our time and energy, not a topic in continuing medical education, and definitely not a place of comfort. At my medical school commencement ceremony, Leon Jaworski, a special prosecutor during Watergate, gave an address in which he scolded the medical community for not being more involved in the political process, insisting that society would benefit from our participation. This message was a lightning bolt out of the blue for me. It was the first time in all my medical school years that any respected senior figure had broached the concept that a physician's role includes engagement in the workings of government. Jaworski was insistent, and he was right.

Influencing the political process (ie, advocating effectively) requires skills and expertise that can be acquired with attention to 3 primary principles: interfacing with legislators, establishing credibility, and joining forces within professional societies.

How to Interface With Legislators

Interfacing with legislators is exactly that: interFACEing. Based on 4 online surveys of congressional staff members (2010-2013) by the Congressional Management Foundation, the most influential way to communicate with a senator or representative is an in-person visit.¹ Successful politicians regard keeping in touch with their constituents to be the most critical factor in their effectiveness.

Getting face time with a legislator can be difficult. In the short-term, the most successful strategy is for the request to come from a constituent who

is affiliated with an association or corporation that represents the interests of many constituents. In the long-term, personal visits, letters (e-mail is preferred for security reasons), and telephone calls are most important when they come from constituents who are well known, highly regarded, and have gone out of their way to be helpful to the legislator's office, which means we need to pay attention to building a relationship with our legislators. For example, I had a long-standing, one-sided correspondence with former representative Barney Frank (Democrat, Massachusetts), writing him regularly on issues that concerned me. I once chided him for not showing up for a vote I thought was important and in return I received a 3-page handwritten letter from him concerning his absence. YES! He knew my name, he knew what was important to me, and he had enough regard for my opinion to answer me personally.

Building a relationship with a staffer can be as important or sometimes even more important than with the legislators themselves. Staffers have direct access to legislators and understand the best way to facilitate moving your information and concerns forward. Meet with them, keep their contact information on hand, and direct your questions and comments to them. Staffers know how you can be helpful to their office, whether it is by supplying information, providing feedback on a position or comment, or hosting a neighborhood coffee gathering in your home so the legislator can meet other constituents. Attending events in your district or offering a simple fundraiser in your home for local and state legislators is an excellent way to be involved with candidates in a way that promotes a future relationship. When the Stark exemption was being discussed in relation to anatomic pathology at an in-office laboratory, I offered a tour of my Mohs unit to a staffer so she could see how integral and important it is for surgeons to perform histology examinations to ensure proper patient care. She did not take me up on the offer, but she subsequently called me with a question concerning a similar issue.

It is not optimal to develop relationships solely with legislators from the political party with which you identify. Dermatologists' professional interests of concern will likely require bipartisan support for resolution.

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Establish Your Credibility

Do some homework on your key issues; find the facts that support your position and also be sure to understand the opposition's concerns. Be able to present your viewpoint in a focused and concise way with a clear sense of what you are asking the legislator to do.

Keep in mind that you want to develop a long-term, trusted relationship. It is important to be respectful and leave general political feelings out of the meeting. Schedule a meeting with the intention of presenting only 2 or 3 concrete requests. During the visit, it helps to set the context for the conversation if you reference a particular bill. Staffers often ask questions about the bill if it is not one they are currently following, which allows you to become a dependable source of good information. You can engage with staffers or legislators by asking them directly and politely for their views and position on the issue. It often is effective to leave them with a 1- to 2-page summary for review and to follow up later with a formal thank you for their time.

Participate in Professional Societies

Join professional societies to acquire the information you need, refine and consolidate messaging, and represent a larger constituency. Most of the societies that dermatologists belong to, including the American Academy of Dermatology Association, the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery Association, and the American College of Mohs Surgery, have identified legislative priorities and promote coordinated visits to Congress. The American Academy of Dermatology Association organizes its annual Legislative Conference in Washington, DC, each fall, which includes an in-depth program of speakers, discussions, and information concerning priority issues. Messages are refined and appointments are made for visits with legislators and/or their staffers. Your small group will include experienced colleagues so that you develop your skills with their mentorship. Many state societies also train their members to be effective at advocacy at the

State House. Finally and most importantly, a sizeable war chest (yes, your dollars are needed too) for SkinPAC, the American Academy of Dermatology Association Political Action Committee, creates notice and respect for dermatology's commitment to the issues of importance to the profession.

Dermatologists Have Impacted Legislation

Interaction by individual dermatologists with legislators has had a direct impact on health care issues. A Medicare Advantage Participant Bill of Rights recently was introduced and has garnered bipartisan support in the Senate due to meetings between dermatologists and key members of Congress and the Obama administration about concerns with narrow physician networks. There is a robust bipartisan Congressional Skin Cancer Caucus that representatives have joined because of discussions with their constituent dermatologists. The strong testimonies of 2 dermatologists in Maryland has picked up 3 more yes votes for passing a bill that prohibits use of tanning devices in minors younger than 18 years in that state. California dermatologists also put enough pressure on their state senators to defeat the elimination of the in-office exception to self-referral for anatomic pathology services.

Final Thoughts

Dermatologists do have a voice. We do have influence. We must "sit at the table."² Build a relationship with your legislators. Develop your message and become a trusted voice. Join forces with other dermatologists. "Let's grab the front seat together."²

REFERENCES

1. Face-to-face with congress: before, during, and after meetings with legislators. Congressional Management Foundation Web site. <http://www.congressfoundation.org/projects/communicating-with-congress/face-to-face>. Accessed January 9, 2015.
2. Sandberg S. Why we have too few women leaders. http://www.ted.com/talks/sheryl_sandberg_why_we_have_too_few_women_leaders. Accessed January 6, 2015.

QUICK POLL QUESTION



Dermatologists can influence the political process. Do you interface with legislators about health care?

- a. yes
- b. no

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