

The power of medical student advocacy

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Featured topic and speakers

In today's COVID-19 Update, medical students share their stories about getting involved in advocacy and the power of students to shape health care policy during the pandemic and beyond.

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Speakers

- Reilly Bealer, Government Relations Advocacy Fellow, AMA
- Ramon Mislá David, MD/PhD student, St. Jude Research Hospital & Ponce Health Sciences University
- Ian Motie, fourth-year medical student, Florida State University College of Medicine

Transcript

Unger: Hello, this is the American Medical Association's COVID-19 Update. Today, we'll talk about the power of medical student advocacy to create change during the pandemic and beyond. I'm joined today by Reilly Bealer, the AMA's Government Relations Advocacy Fellow, or GRAF in Washington, D.C., and a rising third year medical student at the Elson Floyd College of Medicine at Washington State University. And Ramon Mislá David, an MD/PhD student at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital and Ponce Health Sciences University calling in from Memphis, Tennessee. And Ian Motie, a fourth-year medical student at Florida State University College of Medicine. He's calling in from Orlando, Florida. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer in Chicago. Reilly, it's been about a month since the AMA held its Medical Student Advocacy Conference, which we call MAC as a

medical student and the lead on planning this conference. You had a great vantage point to discuss the power of students to create change. What do you hope students took away from this event and in continuing the work now a month later?

Bealer: Yeah, Todd. I'm really glad that you were able to revisit this event because it was so successful. I personally really wanted this event to be for the students, and that's why our medical student input was central to developing every part of this advocacy conference. Medical students are navigating really complex infrastructure and policy issues to which we will have to lead the charge in the future of medicine. Within the AMA, our students have pushed our organization and so many powerful ways in our advocacy efforts to new heights. And we wanted to create a platform where students could be empowered to do this, as well as be provided the tools and resources to hone in on their passions and their skill sets.

Unger: Ramon, was this your first experience with MAC? Obviously, the first is a virtual one.

Misla David: Yeah. This is my first experience from MAC overall. And I got to say it was so fantastic. I love the experience being able to do all of the advocacy, meeting people. Amazing.

Unger: What was that? What did you figure was the most amazing thing? What'd you take away from it that you weren't expecting?

Misla David: For me, one of the really unique and amazing things that I've found from the experience was being able to meet with the legislators, being able to meet with staff and connecting with other medical students that shared that same vision, that same drive to doing advocacy. And it was fantastic to be able to sit with these people and be able to share and be able to have that conversation of why these topics were important. I think that's something that you can never put into words exactly. But it's such a unique experience to be able to have that.

Unger: I think a lot of students are not aware of policymaking and how much power that has with it. Were you surprised by that aspect?

Misla David: So, yes and no. Because I had previously had an experience with being able to work in the U.S. Senate. And that was really my first experience with policymaking with health and science. And that was really, it blew me away. Being able to see how we as students, how we don't have to wait until we're doctors. We don't have to wait until we're tenured. We don't have to wait until years down the road to be able to make that impact. And that experience I had in the Senate and being able to go on MAC with all these other students, it really cemented that idea that we can already start making that change.

Unger: Absolutely. Well, Ian, you've added some big change. You, you recently matched. Congratulations. What's your match?

Motie: Thank you so much, Todd. So I'm excited to be going into internal medicine, starting residency at Sarasota Memorial Healthcare.

Unger: Congratulations. Now that you're getting ready for this next phase, here you look back at your time in medical school, how has being involved in advocacy been a part of your learning experience?

Motie: Yeah. So as I'm approaching now, the conclusion of my undergraduate medical education experience, advocacy has truly been a cornerstone of that experience. I've been involved with the AMA, the Florida Medical Association and the County Medical Societies from the several different societies I've been rotating in throughout medical school. So from the time I was a first year and it has...all those experiences have provided me with a lens to look through whenever I'm in the clinic, whenever I'm seeing patients that quite honestly, you may not really get during medical school. We're taught about pathologies, we're taught about pharmacology. But these experiences have allowed me to look at and notice different patterns that may otherwise not be noticeable.

Unger: I'm curious here, what, you know so much of advocacy is very personal and why people decide to engage. What was it that drove you to engage in advocacy and is there something you're particularly passionate about?

Motie: Definitely. So when I was a first year medical student, our campus was tapped by physicians and medical students from around the state to go to the State Capitol and advocate for legislation that would expand needle and syringe exchange programs to operate within the entire state. And so those experiences taught me a lot about the voice of medical students, specifically at the state level. And I use a lot of those skills I learned during those experiences to do the same thing at my home county of Orange County. And I have to say that one of the most rewarding experiences of my medical student career was hearing the mayor, Jerry Demings, congratulate the medical students on their advocacy as he was signing in that specific piece of legislation. And it's truly been a rewarding experience through and through. But yes, you're absolutely right. That advocacy is personally driven.

Unger: Ramon, what about you?

Misla David: I mean, coming from Puerto Rico, we've been through a lot, right. And these last few years we get Hurricane Maria, Irma, earthquakes on a pandemic and meaning have to live through these experiences, really put that at the front line. It made me realize just the importance of being able to, to come in and advocate for these such important topics from a standpoint that we are already experts in it, right? We are medical students, we're in the field. We're actually capable of making that difference with our patients, with our colleagues, but also being able to bring those experiences and advocate at a legislative level. I think that not experiences back in Puerto Rico, I mean, it shakes you, right. It really puts things into perspective of what's needed. What is it that we can do about it? And I think this is a perfect way for us to get involved. So minds like Ian, and this is very personally motivated.

Unger: Reilly you, yeah. You know, really gotten engaged in a particular campaign about vaccine hesitancy called "This Is Our Shot." And by the way, when I got my first shot, I did put your hashtag on my photo. Can you talk a little bit about what's going on with the This Is Our Shot campaign and why you felt it was important for you to get involved in addressing vaccine hesitancy.

Bealer: Absolutely. This Is Our Shot has done incredible work and those leaders are physicians, they're medical students. It's a grassroots effort to provide education on complex issues and answer questions in a very welcoming and non-judgemental space. And they actually just recently launched their official campaign. So you should check it out. But again, they are ensuring that patients, medical students, other members of the health care team have the comfort to be able to talk about these two patients and talk about them within their own communities. And you know, it's not just vaccine hesitancy, but it's cautiousness. It's good to be informed about health and public health. And we want to have a space where to have these crucial conversations. For example, one of our members, Dr. Jerry Abraham actually was able to testify in front of Congress regarding equitable vaccine efforts. So they are providing that down-home your neighborhood physician voice into really scary public health interventions to be able to make patients feel safe. And I just knew I had to be a part of that.

Unger: We were lucky enough to have Dr. Abraham on the COVID update a few weeks ago. What impressive work he spent doing at his clinic in California. Well, last question for the three of you, what's your message to other medical students, particularly those who may be just starting medical school in the fall, about the need for students to get involved in advocacy early on wherever they are. Ian, why don't you start?

Motie: Definitely. So, to that I have really had two points that I would say. The first being that as physicians in training and physicians, eventually you will engage with advocacy at some point in your career. And so why not start from day one as a first-year medical student, when your brains are still super absorbent sponges. And the second point I would say is that as medical students, you should really never underestimate or undervalue your voice and your impact that you have. During my time as a medical student, both in the AMA and the other organizations that I've been a part of, I've been

very surprised to see the magnificent amount of policies and big changes that have been able to take place just from the voice of medical students. So really, really should recognize the ability and the power that you have as a medical student. And there's no better time to start than now.

Unger: Reilly, how about you?

Bealer: I agree with everything that Ian said. We need your voice. We need your participation to help change the world, because if your voice is not there, we can't hear you. We can't incorporate your views, your opinions, your problem solving skills to make these significant changes. And these things build off each other. You know, the voice of students has real power. Every surgeon in general, every physician in Congress, every CEO of a health organization started out as a medical student with a dream for a change. And we want to give students that power. As GRAF, you think the highlights are the glitz and glamor of working with Congress. But my favorite part and the most meaningful part of this experience for me has been able to help students like Ramon, like Ian, have a platform to highlight their skills and really show their advocacy efforts.

Unger: Ramon, what's your advice?

Misla David: I'm definitely going to echo what my colleagues have said and add that advocacy can take so many forms, right? It's not just going and meet in Congress. It's advocating for your patients. It's advocating at your medical school for your colleagues. It's advocating at the state level and we need your voice. We definitely need that drive. Especially if you have something that you're passionate about, a specific topic. The fact that we are here shows that we can make a difference that our voices are heard. And so that's a very encouraging thought. And part of the reason that we're all here today.

Unger: Well, thank you. I just want to say it's been a pleasure to have you Reilly, Ramon and Ian. You're an inspiration. I hope that other medical students get your message that it's time to get involved and in right away as medical students. Thanks for being here. That's it for today's COVID-19 Update. We'll be back with another segment shortly. In the meantime for resources on COVID-19 visit [ama-assn.org/covid-19](https://www.ama-assn.org/covid-19). Thanks for joining us. Please take care.

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