

How to get time off for professional development during residency

APR 3, 2019

Brendan Murphy

News Writer

As a resident or fellow, time away from the clinic is precious. It is a chance to recharge and pursue your passion.

Some residents elect to use that time to grow professionally and serve the future of medicine by attending advocacy-related meetings—such as the AMA’s Annual and Interim meetings. The 2019 AMA Annual Meeting of the AMA House of Delegates is June 8–12 at the Hyatt Regency Chicago. Officials and members will gather in Chicago for the AMA Annual Meeting to elect officers and address policy.

You can filter the AMA event listing by filters such as location and the intended audience.

Two physicians—one resident and another who recently completed his postgraduate training—offer a number of tips for physicians hoping to secure time off to attend meetings of the AMA and other professional activities.

Plan ahead. The exact number is going to change based on your specialty and program, but residents are typically allotted somewhere between 15–20 days off per year. Getting time off to attend conferences, or any event, requires advanced planning.

“There’s only a limited amount of time,” said Hans Arora, MD, a urology resident at the Cleveland Clinic. “You have to decide how you value your time outside of the hospital and what you want to do with it.”

“Many people, and a great number of my colleagues, use their vacation time to attend meetings. Establishing early to your chief residents in your program that you really want to ensure that the timing of your vacation coincides with meetings helps.”

Work the high-demand vacation days. Vacation time is often allotted based on seniority, so the

most popular dates—the holidays—are the first to go. If you're OK working those days, you'll have more flexibility to use vacation time to attend meetings.

"For your colleagues and your program to allow you the flexibility [to attend meetings] you may have to offer certain tradeoffs," Dr. Arora said. "For instance, I took more call than anybody else and I took less desirable call. It also involves working holidays. Getting last choice of, say, rotation schedule or vacation within your class so that they are able to cover you when you are out any time in addition to vacation."

Add value. Attending a meeting offers you the chance to grow professionally, but there's no reason to keep it to yourself. If you relay the messages to your colleagues, attending a meeting might not be tallied as time off. It is also possible, in some programs, to include meeting attendance as part of your coursework, as a scholarly activity.

"With internal medicine we had elective opportunities," said Carl G. Streed Jr., MD, MPH, an assistant professor of medicine at Boston University School of Medicine and primary care physician at Boston Medical Center.

"I was able to parse a few of my electives into conferences. At the end of the day, it really came down to my being able to report back in some fashion that was useful to other residents. ... It was something I offered. It's easier for them to say 'yes' if I'm already offering something. So I said, 'I could come back and do a morning report.'"

Get creative with your calls. One thing to consider is that your meeting may not align with your program's vacation schedule, so you'll have to get creative.

"In small programs, your vacations are allotted on a five-day stretch typically from Monday to Friday," Dr. Arora said. "That doesn't necessarily work for AMA meetings, which start on a Thursday for the sections and end on a Tuesday or Wednesday. In order to attend, you need to have your programs and colleagues be flexible about that; they have to be able to cover for you when you're out."

Be a team player. Helping out your colleagues is just part of being a good resident. You're going to need time off for meetings and other events as are the residents you work with.

"I compared it to if a friend was moving," Dr. Streed said. "Whenever somebody I knew was moving asked for help, I agreed to help. I knew at some point I would move and I would need their help. It's the same process (with time off), let's say somebody calls out sick or goes to a wedding or a funeral and they need cover, if you can do it, you should go ahead and do it. Then you've earned some favor from them."