

## **Aleesha Shaik, MD, MPH: Giving a voice to those without homes**

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**Staff News Writer**

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The AMA “Members Move Medicine” series profiles a wide variety of doctors, offering a glimpse into the passions of women and men navigating new courses in American medicine.

**On the move with:** Aleesha Shaik, MD, MPH, an internal medicine resident at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. She has served as vice chair of the AMA Medical Student Section.

**AMA member since:** 2014.

**What inspired me to pursue a career in medicine:** For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to be a physician. But beyond playing doctor to stuffed animals, several moments along the way convinced me that this was a profession I really wanted to pursue. It was watching my grandmother serve her community as a nurse in India. It was the family members diagnosed with medical conditions that I wanted to help treat. It was the uninsured homeless man at the free clinic suffering from a preventable diabetic foot ulcer that would require an amputation. It was seeing the power that physicians have in health policy to advocate for more equitable and accessible care for all.

**How I move medicine:** By finding ways to address the gaps and needs I see in the clinic through policy and advocacy to have a greater impact at a population level. If we don’t stand up and speak out on behalf of our patients, who will? In addition, I hope to do my part in empowering the next generation of health care leaders to tackle some of the biggest problems we face in a multidisciplinary and collaborative way.

**Career highlights:** My involvement with organized medicine—on the Council of Student Members of the American College of Physicians, as chair of the Medical Student Section of the Pennsylvania Medical Society, chair of Region 6, and the vice chair of the AMA Medical Student Section—has fundamentally changed how I view the field of medicine, broadening the range of career opportunities I thought were possible. It is inspiring to see my peers and mentors fight tirelessly for their patients and for a healthier America. I’m proud to be among such passionate colleagues and excited to see what we can all accomplish together.

I was also honored to receive the AMA Foundation Excellence in Medicine Leadership award and the Special Recognition award from the Pennsylvania Chapter of the American College of Physicians. In medical school, I was recognized as a Medical Humanities Scholar, a Women’s Health Scholar, and a Health Equity Scholar.

**Advice I’d give to those interested in pursuing a career in medicine:** It is a long but worthwhile journey and it’s up to you how you get to the endpoint. You can get through medical school by just focusing on the books, but I’ve found that being part of something larger, like the AMA, has not only kept me sane through the endless studying, but also allows me to care for patients outside the clinic. The length of your white coat does not determine how much you can do for your patients. Figure out what you are passionate about and find ways to incorporate that into your medical career—whether

it's through policy, education, or public health. The beauty of medicine is that it is an interdisciplinary effort.

**How I give back to the community:** An issue that is particularly close to my heart is that of vulnerable populations and health disparities. During medical school, I started a project called Homeless but Human through which I've spoken with homeless people in several cities across the country—from Philadelphia to Phoenix to Palo Alto—to better understand this public health crisis. During these conversations, I asked them to tell me something about themselves that they wished people knew when they walked past them, as well as something they've had said to them that hurt them.

It has honestly been one of the most powerful experiences of my life to see the level of positivity they maintain, to hear their hopes and dreams, and to identify the vast differences in health care services for this population across the country, while also seeing the similarities we all share. I can then use what I have learned from these stories to help craft meaningful policy through the AMA and give a voice to the voiceless.

The broad range of experiences I've encountered have truly been enlightening, from the Vietnam veteran to the young man with caudal regression syndrome to the domestic violence survivor to the undocumented immigrant who tried to follow the elusive American dream. When I have a rough day at work, I still look back at my conversations with these incredible individuals and am emboldened by their courage and reminded of why I decided to pursue this profession.

I will always remember what Led Zeppelin Dave—the first person I spoke with—told me, “No one wants to be forgotten like an old shoe. We all just want to be loved.” And if someone tells you “you're not going to make it,” prove them wrong.

**Aspect of my work that means the most:** Without a doubt, the time that I get to spend speaking with patients and building relationships is what makes the years of arduous training and countless exams worth it. From the special education teacher to the racehorse breeder to the professional basketball player, there is a person beyond every patient. And it is this time that patients appreciate most too.

**My hope for the future of medicine:** That through interdisciplinary collaboration, we can create a more equitable health care landscape that addresses the whole patient, not just the clinical diagnosis. No number of prescriptions can truly treat a patient if we don't consider social determinants of health. Physicians have an incredibly powerful voice and we shouldn't be afraid to use it to advocate for our patients, no matter how uncomfortable it may initially feel.



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