

Why it's OK for doctors to ask their patients about voting

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Helping patients vote can be an effective preventive and public health measure on par with promoting seatbelt use or vaccinations, according to physician leaders who are working to get their patients civically engaged in the democratic process.

Discussions on the role physicians can play in getting patients civically engaged were part of a recent "Prioritizing Equity" episode on voting during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Serving as moderator, AMA Chief Health Equity Officer Aletha Maybank, MD, MPH, began the program by noting that the subject of the physician's role on this issue was recently addressed in the *AMA Journal of Ethics*[®].

"As the pandemic has quarantined many traditional voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts, health profession students, clinicians and hospitals have stepped up and taken on this civic responsibility," wrote the journal's editor-in-chief, Audiey C. Kao, MD, PhD, in an essay entitled "Health of We the People."

"There are some who think it's not the job of a physician or nurse to register patients and encourage them to vote," Dr. Kao's essay says. "While 'bedside' consensus about clinicians' role in civic engagement is lacking, there is no denying that public policy affects the health and well-being of patients and the public at large."

Dr. Kao also noted that the COVID-19 pandemic and "chronic public policy failures" have had a disproportionate health impact on minoritized and marginalized communities.

Tools to help patients vote

Voting is part of civic engagement and being part of a representative democracy, Nathan T. Chomilo, MD, pediatrician and medical director for MinnesotaCare and Minnesota's Medicaid program, said during the panel discussion, which is part of the AMA's "Prioritizing Equity" YouTube video series.

"As physicians, we have a role to help inform that process and to also to help empower our patients and communities be engaged in the process so their needs are heard by their elected leaders," said Dr. Chomilo, who is interim chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics' (AAP) Section on Minority Health, Equity and Inclusion's policy and advocacy workgroup.

The AAP is partnering with an organization called VotER to provide its members with tools to engage with patients on voting.

Manisha A. Sharma, MD, a leadership fellow with the California Health Care Foundation, co-founded VoteHealth2020, an organization of physicians and other health professionals committed to boosting voter turnout by helping colleagues and patients register to vote.

One of the organization's goals was to "create old-school-meets-new-school" tools to spur clinician and patient civic engagement. These include developing fliers that can be distributed in doctors' offices and materials with quick response (QR) codes that can be used to register to vote, check voter registration status, and request an absentee or mail-in ballot.

Dr. Sharma also advocated that physicians and other health professionals volunteer as poll workers to facilitate voting in their community and ensure that polling places are being operated with proper physical distancing, mask wearing and sufficient hand sanitizer.

Facilitating voter registration is another way physicians can help staff and patients get civically engaged.

The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 allows nonpartisan voter registration in any venue where public assistance—such as Medicaid-financed care—is provided, Dr. Chomilo noted.

Nonpartisan voter registration is also allowed at 501(c)(3) charitable organizations, Dr. Sharma said, and this includes federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) and most teaching hospitals.

"Whenever there is pushback on it not being legal, it's a myth," she said.

Another routine question

Dr. Sharma co-wrote a September 2014 *Annals of Family Medicine* study, “Results of a Voter Registration Project at 2 Family Medicine Residency Clinics in the Bronx, New York.” Of the 304 patients engaged for the project, 128 were eligible to vote but not registered to vote at that time. Of those, 114 (89%) took advantage of the opportunity to register.

“If health centers step up their role in community civic activism, they can act as powerful vehicles for bringing a voice to communities underrepresented in the electoral process,” Dr. Sharma and her colleagues wrote.

Asking about voting can be a routine question in an exam, Dr. Sharma said, suggesting a sequence of questions such as “Do you wear seat belts? Did you get a flu shot? Are you registered to vote?”

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