6 ways to shape health policy as a medical student

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The impact of national, state and local policies on health outcomes has never been made more self-evident than during the COVID-19 pandemic that has already killed hundreds of thousands of Americans. When it comes to influencing policy, it’s never too early in your physician journey to make your voice heard.

Marisa Dowling, MD, a health policy fellow and research instructor at George Washington University, offered some insight on the venues through which students can make a policy impact during a presentation at AMA’s 2020 Medical Student National Advocacy Week.

“The most important thing is, first of all, to show up,” Dr. Dowling said. “You’d be surprised how many people aren’t at the table. Two is you need an interest or passion to keep you motivated long-term. For many of us, it’s similar to the way we want to help others by addressing the social determinants of health. It’s the same end goal with health policy. You just are doing it on a more macro scale.”

Clubs and committees

Organized medicine entities such as the AMA offer a lot of opportunities to get involved—many of them through the AMA Medical Student Section. These organizations offer networking and learning opportunities early in your career.

Gaining a leadership positions in a national organization or advocacy organizations at the state or local level can help your resume. Dr. Dowling said her involvement in organized medicine led her down her current career path.

Publishing

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Whether you attempt to submit a formal research article or publish through a blog, getting your viewpoint out in the world can pay dividends. Publishing may also offer medical students the chance to get valuable work with a physician mentor.

Discover how to get published in medical school and boost your CV.

Volunteering

From Dr. Dowling’s vantage point, volunteering and policymaking fall into the same bucket.

“At the very least, volunteering informs policy,” Dr. Dowling said. “What you see in the clinic or how the social determinants of health are playing out in the community—if you volunteer at a food bank or homeless shelter—you get to see a different side of the community. That will inform what you do in the policy space. I wouldn’t ignore those opportunities.”

Find out more with the AMA about how volunteering now can make you a better medical student.

Medical school coursework

Medical schools tend to offer elective classes that offer some insight on health policy. Dr. Dowling also recommended looking outside of your medical school at other graduate programs that may allow medical students to take classes formally or audit them by sitting in.

“Don’t feel like you only need to stick with your straight medical school courses,” she said. “There’s a lot you can learn on these campuses.”

Pursuing a dual degree

Most medical schools offer some form of a dual-degree option for medical students. The most common degrees tends to be the master’s degree in public health (MPH) and PhD programs.

The MPH has appeal to medical students because it has significant overlap with clinical experience and most programs tend to take the MCAT. PhD programs take longer and are difficult to gain admission to, but they offer a significant leg up for medical students planning for a research heavy career.

Learn more about the pros and cons of pursuing a dual degree.
Elective rotations and internships

She also touted the potential to do a medical school rotation that focuses on policy. As a medical student Dr. Dowling did a rotation at the Department of Health and Human Services during which she helped with research, working on quality metrics.

Organized medicine organizations and government agencies also offer advocacy-related internships. The AMA offers a medical-student fellowship—Government Relations Advocacy Fellow—that gives medical students the chance to interact with politicians and shape policy over an entire year working as a full-time, paid staff member.