In unprecedented times, medical students fight for these 4 issues

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In her role as the AMA Government Relations Advocacy Fellow (GRAF), medical student Reilly Bealer works directly on the issues that are important to the members of the AMA Medical Student Section.

Medical students are “the conscience of medicine,” Bealer said. That means having a passion to advocate for all patients and striving for betterment of the future of health care.

During a recent conversation with the AMA, Bealer, who as GRAF is on a one-year paid fellowship in the AMA’s Washington office working with Advocacy and interacting with politicians to help shape policy, offered insight on the issues that have been most prominent in her work during a remarkable year for health care. She listed four issues that are top of mind for many medical student advocates.

The COVID-19 pandemic

Some medical student advocacy priorities remain fairly consistent. The COVID-19 pandemic is different, however. Coming into her position, Bealer, like most Americans, didn’t see a historic pandemic on the horizon.

“With COVID, students really care about being part of the solution,” Bealer said. “It’s difficult because we are not practicing medicine right now, but we are still wanting to advocate. We are wanting to voice how important it is to protect our patients as well as our health care workers. So, making sure PPE and all the protective equipment is available is absolutely critical.”

Learn how this med student company’s product could make hospitals safer during the pandemic.

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Health equity

Addressing inequities in society as well as the care provision is a priority for medical students, who will someday run the U.S. system of care.

“We are a new generation of physicians who recognize that what brings you into a hospital bed is not just your diet or level of exercise,” Bealer said. “Health is comprised so many different factors. It’s your ability to access transportation. It’s your ability for affordable, high-quality housing and healthy foods. Systemic racism, these are long-standing, deep rooted components of infrastructure which impact health. “Medical students want to ensure that physicians are being involved in the conversations about these issues. As we are moving forward, medical students feel it’s critical to focus on health equity. We want to ensure patients have what they need to thrive.”

Discover the insights that medical students offer on inequities during COVID-19.

Immigration

Travel bans related to the pandemic have had an impact on some medical students. As has the Trump administration’s recent failed attempt to overturn the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). The AMA filed a brief in support of keeping the law in place.

“Many health care workers and physicians are DACA recipients,” Bealer said. “If this program were to be eliminated they’d be unable to work and live in the country that these individuals know as their homes.

“Some medical students are DACA dreamers as well. I’m really proud of the AMA in taking such a strong stance in making sure these individuals who have spent a majority of their lives in this country are able to stay and continue their education path.”

Learn how the AMA is fighting for IMG physicians on several fronts with many allies.

Graduate medical education

Increasing the number of residency positions and how they are geographically distributed has been a consistent medical student priority over the years. That remains the case in Bealer’s work. “There’s a need to change residency and change the availability for students to have graduate level training,” said Bealer, who is taking a year off from her studies at the Elson Floyd College of Medicine at

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Washington State University to work as AMA GRAF. “This is an issue that students are directly involved with. It’s about ensuring that we have enough residency slots, and create a system where students are able to match and receive the proper training and find positions to allow residents to serve in these high need areas.” The AMA has curated a selection of resources to assist residents and medical students during the COVID-19 pandemic to help manage the shifting timelines, cancellations and adjustments to testing, rotations, and other events.

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