Medical students do not yet have all the scientific or clinical know-how their future profession requires, but they typically possess abundant enthusiasm. That passion can be harnessed for effective advocacy on behalf of patients and physicians.

A recent AMA panel discussion—“Your Voice, Your AMA: Health Care Advocacy and the New Administration”—offers insight on the advocacy landscape for medical students looking to get involved. It also gives students a playbook for what they need to do to effectively communicate with policy makers.

The 2021 AMA Medical Student Advocacy Conference, March 4-5, gives medical students the tools to advocate on crucial health care issues. Held virtually because of the pandemic, to connect with industry experts, political insiders and members of Congress. For medical students looking to begin a career in advocacy, these tips on effective communication with politicians—offered during the panel discussion—provide a jumping-off point.

Don’t delay

Advocacy and patient care go hand in hand. Just as now is the time medical students are learning key clinical skills, it’s also the time to learn key advocacy skills.

“There’s no better time to start than now as an advocate,” said Todd Askew, the AMA’s senior vice president of advocacy. “It’s not an option. It’s an obligation you have to provide for the needs of your patients in all ways. You have to bring to it that conviction that this is what you are supposed to be doing. This is not “I hope they will listen to me.” It’s your job. You can’t be intimidated, and you can’t be
put off. ... These people are never going to hear you if you don’t try to speak with them. So jump in.”

Learn how adversity has driven one medical student’s congressional advocacy.

**Know where your expertise lies**

As a medical student, you are typically going to advocate on issues that affect you and your patients, such as scope of practice or medical student-loan forgiveness. While politicians are key policymakers, they may not have a total understanding of the landscape—particularly when it comes to medical training.

“Legislators know a lot of things,” said Jenny Young, director of membership for the Virginia Medical Society. “One thing they don’t necessarily know about is medical education. They don’t understand that after you graduate medical school you are a doctor, but you still have three to eight years before you are allowed to practice independently.”

Check out this great advice on how to get involved in advocacy as a medical student.

**Ask experienced physician-advocates**

Who better to offer advice on effective communication with policymakers than those who have done it for years?

“One thing we do in Virginia that is great is [medical students] have access to some of the top physician lobbyists out there through our state medical society,” Young said.

Contacting those people can prove helpful, according to Young.

“Reach out to them and ask, how do you talk to a legislator? See if you can get a Zoom session and see how you can be an advocate for your profession and your patients.”

**Be ready for pushback**

Handy talking points and relevant data are only part of the preparation. You also have to be ready for pushback.

“It can be a really tough thing when you are going to talk to a legislator who you know, off the bat, based on previous comments or voting record, isn’t going to agree with you,” Young said. “The first
thing I'll say is if you are talking to them and they start to argue with you, do not argue with them back. That's kind of a basic thing. “Prepare yourself for that conversation as you would for a difficult conversation with a patient. Come to that room and that conversation with all the data and facts that you can.”