

Preview of the virtual AMA Medical Student Advocacy Conference

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Featured topic and speakers

In today's COVID-19 Update, panelists also discussed about why it's important for medical students to get involved in advocacy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Speakers

- Reilly Bealer, Government Relations Advocacy Fellow, AMA
- Dana Lichtenberg, assistant director, congressional affairs, AMA
- Jennifer Brown, JD, senior attorney, Division of Legislative Council, AMA

Transcript

Unger: Hello, this is the American Medical Association's COVID-19 Update. Today, we'll get a preview of the AMA's Medical Student Advocacy Conference and discuss why it's so important for medical students to get involved in advocacy during the pandemic. I'm joined today by Reilly Bealer, the AMA's Government Relations Advocacy Fellow or GRAF in Washington, D.C. and a rising third-year medical student at the Elson Floyd College of Medicine at Washington State University. Dana Lichtenberg, AMA assistant director of congressional affairs in Washington, D.C. and Jennifer Brown, a senior attorney in the AMA's Division of Legislative Council in Washington, D.C. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer in Chicago. Ms. Bealer, let's start with a few words about what the Medical Student Advocacy Conference is.

Bealer: Yes, Todd. So it is an annual conference that's typically held in D.C. where students are given the opportunities to hear from distinguished speakers and the administration and Congress. They are able to learn about critical issues as well as being able to go to the hill and advocate and lobby their representatives and senators.

Unger: So there's going to be a little bit of a change up this year for a virtual Medical Student Advocacy Conference, given the pandemic. Can you tell us how this meeting is going to roll out differently than last year?

Bealer: Yes. So this was the first time we're doing an all virtual Medical Student Advocacy Conference. This means that all of our presenters are going to be virtual. We'll do virtual hill visits, where students are able to talk with their representatives or other members of Congress on a Zoom platform or video chat platform. But most importantly, it increases the accessibility for students to participate for those who aren't able to travel to Washington D.C. Just about, I believe, last night we discovered that we now have over 910 medical students registered, and that is way beyond any of the past years.

Unger: Yeah, I think we're on route to a tripling the number of students that'll participate in this year's Medical Student Advocacy Conference, which is just amazing. I'm sure one thing people really wonder is what a virtual Capitol Hill visit looks like. How's that work?

Bealer: Definitely. And I'm sure my colleague, Dana can tell us much more about this. That's what she does every day. But for students, you're able to attend a 15- to 20-minute meeting with your congressional representative or senator or their staffers, and are able to present issues that are critical to medicine. And this year we're going to discuss issues like medical marijuana research, advancing telehealth and combating maternal mortality. In this setting, they're able to describe the issues, provide personal examples of how the issue has affected them personally, or their communities, and then discuss the solutions that the AMA has put forward to combat these issues.

Unger: So the conference is going to address a number of key advocacy topics, some of which you outlined just now and prepare students to advocate on those issues. Ms. Brown, can you walk us

through some of those key issues and how the students are going to be trained?

Brown: Sure. There are three key issues the medical students will be advocating for this year, as she said, combating maternal mortality morbidity, relations surrounding medical marijuana research and telehealth accessibility and innovation. My portfolio covers maternal mortality and morbidity for the AMA. The U.S. has the highest maternal mortality rate among developed countries, and particularly Black women are three to four times more likely to die from pregnancy related causes than White women. So this is a really important issue for us to be at the forefront of and advocating for solutions to address this issue.

Unger: Those are pretty shocking numbers. Ms. Lichtenberg, you're the lead on telehealth. There are a lot of activity on telehealth this past year, for sure. What are you going to be talking about at the event?

Lichtenberg: Well, telehealth is exploded in the past year because of COVID and is very clear to everyone, including members of Congress that no one wants to go back to not being able to use these fabulous new technologies as part of the practice of medicine and to be able to expand access. The problem is Medicare is operating under a number of restrictions. They can't cover telehealth unless you live in a rural area and you have actually gone to a regenerating health care site. That doesn't make any sense. Congress allowed the agency to waive the restrictions but they go away as soon as a public health emergency goes away, so that is our big ask for Congress this year and what we'd like the students to advocate for, because this has been the bright spot this year and we really don't want to lose it.

Bealer: And Todd, if I just can say, we have our members of our advocacy team who are subject matter experts, people who have been working on these issues for years personally coming and speaking with our students, giving them tips on most effective ways of communicating with your representatives, as well as tips and tricks on how to address these issues, how to have the most impactful meeting and we're very grateful for them.

Unger: That is one of the key advantages of a meeting like this is just the access to experts like this. Ms. Bealer, do students understand that it is really important to get involved in advocacy right now?

Bealer: Todd, I really think that they do. I mean, given everything going on with the pandemic, with some civil unrest, students are putting forward their best selves to try to advocate for those around them and those who have historically maybe not had a voice. And although I'm at the center of what's going on, I'm the least important person. Students, our MSS coalition, the powerful passion and voices that our students have is just pushing us to shape health care further. And it gives me hope knowing that I'm going into the right profession in a time when things seem very bleak, the love and the passion that my colleagues have been providing for our fellow human beings keeps us as an organization going.

Unger: Ms. Brown, how do you explain to students why it's so important to get involved in advocacy now?

Brown: Actions that they take now with regards to advocating on Capitol Hill will last well beyond their time in medical school. This will impact their careers long term, this will impact their patients, this will impact their ability to provide care to their patients and just the overall environment that they'll be working in when they leave medical school. So it's mission critical that we address some of these important issues like maternal health, because a lot of these people will be in direct contact. A lot of these students will be in direct contact with these patients when they leave medical school and start their residencies, so it's really important that we start working on these critical policy issues now.

Unger: Ms. Lichtenberg anything to add?

Lichtenberg: Well, my old boss used to say the most important ideas came from her. So I think this is an opportunity for students to start learning that members of Congress listen to home, the people at home more than anything else. We can do our work up here in D.C., but if they don't hear that this is important from the people who are directly impacted, nothing changes.

Unger: That's so important. Ms. Bealer, in addition to learning how to advocate on issues like the ones we've talked about, they're going to be quite a few high profile speakers on the agenda. Can you share some of the meeting highlights that are planned?

Bealer: Yes. Although we're not going to be in-person and it will never supplement the same as in-person, we have a jam-packed schedule for students. We have congressional addresses from Senator Barrasso, Representative Robin Kelly and Representative Kim Schrier and more. We have incredible speakers coming to do fireside chats, including Dr. Peter Hotez, which I know was recently on your show. And then we also have advocacy education programs. So looking at health equity with subject matter experts, also public health infrastructure, and then the inside life of a congressional staffer. And then finally, just to take the edge off from a very incredibly jam-packed day of educational events, we are doing a networking mixer with AMA ambassadors. So students from across the country can get to know one another and be able to share each other's experiences.

Unger: What a great opportunity. We did have Dr. Hotez on our update this past week and talk about a role model and hero in medicine right now, always so interesting to learn from him what's going on the vaccine front. Ms. Lichtenberg, if students can't attend the conference, what are some ways that they can get involved with advocacy at the national, state or local level?

Lichtenberg: It's always good to join. One of the most important things we can do to try to advocate our position is to have a collective voice. And so, joining your school's activities, your professions organizations and associations, and other groups that are trying to put forth the issues that you're interested in really does make a difference. Collectively you can really pass on a message to

Congress, which you really can't do as an individual. So I always say look around and see what's available in your community and be happy to join.

Unger: I think that's a great recommendation and getting involved with the AMA as a student, a lot of leadership opportunities available to students through that channel. How can students register for the conference, Ms. Bealer?

Bealer: Yeah, so this virtual conference is on March 4th and March 5th, and then although registration for virtual health visits is over, our members are still more than welcome to attend the educational events, speaker presentations, and be as much of a part of the event as they'd like to. You can register and learn more about the conference at ama-assn.org/mac.

Unger: That's excellent. And what an exciting event. It's great to see the expanded audience for the Medical Student Advocacy Conference and I look forward to hearing what comes out of it. That wraps up our COVID-19 update. Again, thank you, Ms. Bealer, Ms. Lichtenberg and Ms. Brown for being here today and sharing this information.

If you're a medical student, you want to get involved in this conference, go to ama-assn.org/mac for Medical Student Advocacy Conference, MAC. And for resources on COVID-19, visit ama-assn.org/covid-19. Thanks for joining us, please take care.

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