Brittany Ikwuagwu on the power of medical student advocacy

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Featured topic and speakers

In today’s episode of Moving Medicine, kicking off the AMA’s Medical Student National Advocacy Week, AMA Chief Experience Officer Todd Unger talks with Brittany Ikwuagwu, the AMA’s government relations advocacy fellow in Washington, D.C., about the power of medical student advocacy to create change.

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Speaker

Brittany Ikwuagwu, AMA Government Relations Advocacy Fellow (GRAF)

Transcript

Unger: Hello, this is the American Medical Association's Moving Medicine video and podcast. Today we're kicking off the AMA's Medical Student National Advocacy Week by talking with Brittany Ikwuagwu, the AMA's Government Relations Advocacy Fellow, or GRAF, in Washington, D.C., about the power of medical student advocacy to create change. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer in Chicago. Brittany, welcome. It's so good to have you and congratulations on becoming
GRAF. You've got a lot of opportunity ahead to have big impact in the world of advocacy. I thought it'd be helpful for folks out there just to understand where did your passion for advocacy come from?

Ikwuagwu: Yes. Thank you so much for the question. So I'm a medical student and everyone who wants to go into medicine and be a physician is because they want to help people. And so as a physician, we learn we get to help people one-on-one, patient to patient. But what I've learned is that through advocacy, I can elevate that from an individual level to a population level. And so when I learned that that was something that I could do through advocacy, I just realized that that's where my passion lies, to be able to emphasize the work that I want to do as a physician.

Unger: It's kind of like an ability to scale you and all of your contributions beyond just that individual level.

Ikwuagwu: Exactly.

Unger: So you stepped into this kind of position as a medical student at a really pivotal time in health care advocacy. What has it been like so far and what are you finding to be the big opportunities for you?

Ikwuagwu: Yeah. So there has been some unique challenges coming into the position in the middle of a global pandemic, especially right now in the virtual format. Let me tell you, Zoom fatigue is so real but it's really what's helped me is finding out different tips and tricks and things to try to get the medical students more engaged, whether it be trying to help them connect to why they want to be in advocacy in the first place. I've learned that that reason, advocacy in general, is a super personalized thing. So being able to connect back to that reason and trying to get them more engaged by showing that together we can all make a big impact no matter if we're in a virtual format or not.

Unger: Well, you've answered my question and I think it's really a one word answer. Can a medical student have a big impact in advocacy?

Ikwuagwu: Yes, yes, yes. 1000% yes. I know us as medical students, we feel that we're at the beginning of our medical careers, we're at the bottom of the proverbial totem pole but we can have really, really big impacts. I've seen that firsthand just in my short three months as GRAF, of the work that we do can really be amplified.

Unger: Is that a surprise to you? And do you think that most of your fellow medical students understand just how much sway they can have in advocacy and in policy making?

Ikwuagwu: Yes. Definitely, at the beginning of this, I didn't think that something that I see personally as a medical student on my rotations, how I could use that example to try to make sure that it doesn't happen again. I think that a lot of my fellow medical students, they also don't understand that, which is
why I love being in this position so I can kind of dispel that myth. We do have a lot of power as medical students to help our future patients.

Unger: Well, one of the ways obviously that you've learned about that is through your involvement in the AMA Medical Student Section. Can you talk a little bit for those out there that are not familiar with the MSS, as we call it. What is it and how does it give medical students a voice?

Ikwuagwu: Yes, I love the AMA-MSS. That's kind of what got me super, super passionate about advocacy. So we are one of the sections, I think the best section, within the House of Delegates filled with medical students, filled with some of the most innovative and inspiring and passionate people that I have ever had the privilege to meet. And so we get together, we come up with our own resolutions, our own policies based off of things that we see.

Unger: Do you think that kind of experience and I mean leadership training is going to benefit you personally as you proceed into your residency and beyond?

Ikwuagwu: Yes, for sure. I think that my involvement within the MSS and everyone who is working with the MSS, we are developing the leadership skills to be the future leaders in medicine and to really help out everyone.

Unger: You talked a little bit about why advocacy is so important to you personally. Why is it that all medical students need to take time for advocacy? It's probably not something that is in the core curriculum there that you have to do. But are you finding out that you and other medical students are realizing this is something you really do need to get involved with?

Ikwuagwu: Yes, yes. Yes. It's very important because we have the power now as medical students to impact not only our future patients' lives but impact our future lives as either resident physicians or as practicing attending physicians ourselves. We can help make decisions and policies that will help those in the future. And then it'll also, as I said before, really help with professional development, help us learn ongoing skills and knowledge beyond the classroom.

Unger: You mentioned you're in this position now and focused on advocacy in the middle of a pandemic. One of the things I hear constantly from the different physicians that we talked to is that the pandemic made everything that was bad, way worse. Are there any particular issues that you and your fellow medical students are particularly focused on right now?

Ikwuagwu: Yes. As part of our National Advocacy Week this year is moving forward with the new normal of medicine. As you just mentioned because of the pandemic, the entire medical committee community has had to pivot into this new normal that we find ourselves in. So something that we have all been super focused on is telehealth coverage. That has been a really important thing, especially now in terms of COVID. Achieving health equity and maternal health, health equity has really kind of
permeated and everything in the medical community. And we kind of want to keep the pressure on that because health equity for all hasn't been achieved yet. We're also talking about the Medicare payment cuts, as well as graduate medical education and expanding more residency spots for us.

**Unger:** Well, I'm hoping you can define what the new normal is. We're all waiting to understand that path forward. Medical Student National Advocacy Week, big things on your agenda. How does that differ from other grassroots efforts out there that medical students can get involved with?

**Ikwuagwu:** So for the week we have a ton of different advocacy activities, particularly getting involved with social media activism, making sure everyone gets on these different platforms to amplify our message.

**Unger:** I love that because one of the things we're really working on here is making physician voices and obviously the voice of medical students the loudest in the room. When it comes to health care and medical care, that's the way it should be. One of the other benefits, despite Zoom fatigue, is the ability through this kind of virtual approach to track some really terrific speakers. Can you talk about who will be addressing the students at this?

**Ikwuagwu:** Yes. We have gotten some really rockstar speakers to come speak with us in National Advocacy Week. We first have the honorable Janet Woodcock, who is the acting commissioner of the FDA. We have the honorable Dr. Rachel Levine, who is the assistant secretary of health, as well as Dr. Siobhan Westcott, who is the director of the American Indian Health Program at the University of Nebraska and Medical Center. As well as a number of other great representatives like Representative Kim Schrier, as well as Representative Robin Kelly. So we're super excited.

**Unger:** It sounds really exciting and a great opportunity for medical students to get involved in advocacy for this event and beyond. Do you have any advice for students who do want to get more involved?

**Ikwuagwu:** Yes. So there will be a registration link for Advocacy Week that'll be available in the description of this episode. And beyond this week, getting involved with the MSS, there's always different leadership opportunities as well as different events that we hold.

**Unger:** And you can find out more about the Medical Student Section on the AMA website. Brittany, thank you so much for being here. I can't help but feel your enthusiasm on the other end of this call, and I wish you the best of luck in making an impact this year.

**Ikwuagwu:** Thank you so much.

**Unger:** That wraps up our episode of Moving Medicine for today. We'll be back with another one shortly, but don't miss another episode of AMA Moving Medicine. You can subscribe at Apple
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