6 ways doctors can use their voices to help science get heard

NOV 11, 2021

Sara Berg, MS
Senior News Writer

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the need to elevate physician voices to help cut through misinformation maelstrom and take back the ear of American patients. When it comes to medicine, physicians’ voices must carry the most power in the conversation. Knowing how to make that happen is key.

Even prior to COVID-19, AMA member Peter Hotez, MD, PhD, wrote and spoke against “this very aggressive anti-vaccine lobby that had gotten so strong,” he said during a plenary session of the November 2021 AMA Section Meetings, which again were held virtually due to the pandemic.

“There was a void and there was a place for a physician-scientist to say: Hey, wait a minute. This is not reality—here’s the reality,” said Dr. Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine, and professor of pediatrics and molecular virology and microbiology at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

Dr. Hotez, who is working with colleagues to develop a low-cost COVID-19 vaccine for use in developing nations, said he started speaking up on vaccination and other lifesaving medical interventions because he felt compelled to do so.

“I found myself uniquely positioned and would say to myself, ‘Well, if I don’t do this, who will?’” he said.

Also joining the conversation about how to make physicians’ voices the loudest in the room was a panel of physicians who are part of the AMA Ambassador Program, which equips individuals with the skills and knowledge to confidently speak to the AMA's initiatives and the value of membership. The program also increases overall awareness about what the AMA does for physicians and their patients. The panelists were:

- Jerry P. Abraham, MD, MPH, CMQ a family physician in Los Angeles and director of Kedren Vaccines. He is also a member of the AMA Council on Constitution and Bylaws.
- Daniel E. Choi, MD, an orthopaedic spine surgeon in Long Island, New York, and alternate delegate for the AMA Private Practice Physicians Section.

URL: https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/public-health/6-ways-doctors-can-use-their-voices-help-science-get-heard
Copyright 1995 - 2021 American Medical Association. All rights reserved.
Megan Srinivas, MD, MPH, an infectious diseases specialist and translational health policy research fellow at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
Fatima Cody Stanford, MD, MPH, MPA, MBA, an obesity medicine physician-scientist at Harvard Medical School.

Here is what they had to say about amplifying physician voices and how to be the loudest in the room.

Choose what is meaningful to you

“The reason I got into combining anti-vaccine sentiments was because I was a vaccine scientist and had a daughter with autism. But there are other things out there as well,” said Dr. Hotez. “If you’re going to take on socially important issues, try to do it in a way that’s consistent with your career path.

“That means knowing where you’re going, try to create a road map for yourself, build your own brand and do what’s meaningful,” he added. “Try to be strategic in the social issues that you take on and try to find things where you can make a difference—where your knowledge as a subject-matter expert could really make an impact.”

Don’t be afraid to show emotion

“I don't mind showing flashes of emotion,” said Dr. Hotez, noting that he has even teared up on a couple of occasions during appearances on national TV “because it's just so freaking sad, the information that I'm conveying, and that builds trust.”

“People want to see as much accurate information as authenticity, and by doing that it provides reassurance that you're a real person,” he said. "Don't be afraid to show who you are. People respond to that.”

Be as prepared as you can be

“Use your gift of being a healer, of being passionate, an advocate for the patients we serve,” said Dr. Abraham. “Whether you’re a medical student, a resident, a fellow or a practicing physician—even in later career—we all have a role to play in advancing the health of the public and advancing science.”

“We don’t all need to be experts on every platform, every avenue, everything—that's a lot of pressure
to put on ourselves. Do what you do and do it really well,” he said. “From there, be as prepared as you can be. You never know when they're going to call upon you to speak up on critical issues that affect the lives of your patients or the community.”

Customize your message

“When people want to know in-depth information at a very high level, it's important that we give it to them, but we also have to recognize that not everybody has the same level of health literacy,” said Dr. Srinivas. “It's important that we realize we're going to be dealing with different levels of understanding.

“It’s important that we relate everything to people in these different populations and customize our message to those people,” she added.

Pick one platform

“You don't have to post on all the platforms. Pick one platform and study it. Study it like you studied organic chemistry when you were pre-med or physiology in med school,” said Dr. Choi, adding that physicians can “study each platform by looking at some of the big influencers.”

“For the optimal ways of getting your content out … knowing that algorithm and knowing your audience are going to be key in amplifying your very critical and important message to your audience,” he said. “So I encourage you to just study the algorithm.”

Go out to the community

For Dr. Stanford, when it comes to people from historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups, she thinks “about where would they like to consume their information.”

The answer? “It’s in a lot of the church or faith-based communities that this work is going on—where the trusted information is coming from,” she said. “If I'm a doctor in that setting, delivering that work in that way, then I am even more trusted.”

“This is where they're consuming information … so why not be in those spaces? You can utilize those spaces and tie that to what you're doing in social media,” said Dr. Stanford.