Brittany Ikwuagwu talks about med student advocacy on key issues

AMA's Moving Medicine video series amplifies physician voices and highlights developments and achievements throughout medicine.

Featured topic and speakers

In today’s episode of Moving Medicine, AMA Chief Experience Officer Todd Unger chats with Brittany Ikwuagwu, the AMA’s current government relations advocacy fellow, or GRAF, about the power of medical student advocacy and the AMA’s upcoming Medical Student Advocacy Conference (MAC). This year’s conference will be held virtually, March 3-4, 2022, and will include one day of programming and one day of scheduled virtual Capitol Hill meetings to advocate on key issues like prior authorization, telehealth and payment reform.

Register or learn more about the AMA’s 2022 Medical Student Advocacy Conference.

**Note:** Students must register by **Tuesday, Feb. 15** to meet with legislators during the conference.

Learn more about the AMA Medical Student Section.

**Speaker**

- Brittany Ikwuagwu, AMA Government Relations Advocacy Fellow (GRAF)

**Transcript**

URL: https://www.ama-assn.org/member-groups-sections/medical-students/brittany-ikwuagwu-talks-about-med-student-advocacy-key

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Unger: Today we’re talking with Brittany Ikwuagwu, the AMA’s Governmental Relations Advocacy Fellow, we’ll just call that GRAF, in Washington, D.C., about the power of medical student advocacy and the AMA’s upcoming Medical Student Advocacy Conference. I’m Todd Unger, AMA’s chief experience officer in Chicago.

Welcome back, Brittany. Thanks again for taking some time to tell us about the Medical Student Advocacy Conference that’s coming up in a couple of weeks. But registration to meet with legislators, which is so important during that conference closes this Tuesday, February 15, so time is of the essence for those that are interested in.

Brittany, why don’t we start by talking a little bit about why medical students should attend this virtual conference and meet with legislators too?

Ikwuagwu: All right, well, thank you so much, Todd, for having me back but I think it's really important because it's important to get training on being a public health advocate. Speaking on behalf of myself, I think this is one of the many crucial roles we have as a physician.

With this conference, we can learn about the issues that are important to medical students and the priorities that we have in our Medical Student Section. But the biggest thing about this conference is having your voice be heard by key decision-makers and that's our elected officials. It is an amazing experience and I want every medical student to get the opportunity to share in that.

Unger: It might not be something that you learn every day in medical school.

Ikwuagwu: That's for sure.

Unger: There’s a chance to be able to really have an impact on the Hill, so to speak. This couldn't be a more important time with what we've gone through over the past two years in the pandemic. How do you see the need increasing for this type of training for medical students given what we've just been through with the pandemic?

Ikwuagwu: Yeah, no, you bring up a fantastic point. I feel like the pandemic really exposed the existing health disparities in this country, especially for those of marginalized and historically underserved communities. I think we as medical students, we saw this going on and we went into action with our advocacy to amplify the voices of those who may not have been heard.

With this pandemic, we've really been able to see the creativity of the medical students when it comes to our advocacy efforts. It's not easy, as you know, to be in a virtual format and conduct the outreach that we do but it's getting done. We're entering into year three of this pandemic and us as medical students are continually showing up, and frankly showing out with our advocacy. It's really been an honor to witness the work and I'm so proud to be part of the section.
Unger: You're right. There's never been a more important time for students to represent. Despite the pandemic, we are going to offer something really terrific. It's going to be virtual again for the second year in a row. That might be a little confusing to some folks when they think about Capitol Hill visits. Why don't you tell us how this is going to work?

Ikwuagwu: Yes, so this will be a two-day conference. So, the first day on March 3 will kind of be an overview of the program, you'll learn how exactly do you speak to a legislator. We have some really amazing educational sessions on really important things that are priorities to our section, as well as hearing from some other great MSS and other AMA leaders, which will all end with our state meeting. So, each different state will come together and kind of strategize what these visits can kind of look like.

Then the next day, that Friday on March 4, you will have the opportunity to actually conduct those visits, so how that's going to look like. You'll be on the Zoom platform and you'll enter different breakout rooms to meet with your scheduled legislator. We are saying though if you do want to participate in a visit, it is a requirement to attend both your state meeting, as well as the live legislation congressional session.

Unger: Well, this might be a little embarrassing to admit but I have never talked to my state legislator and it would make me nervous just thinking about it. Obviously not a skill that comes naturally. You're not just going to put people out there without some training. What does that training look like?

Ikwuagwu: No, of course, Todd. Honestly, I mean, it can be a daunting task to talk to these legislators and we acknowledge and we respect everyone's different comfort levels. As I mentioned before, we're going to have a two-part live training session with a mock conversation to model what a successful visit will look like. I just really want to emphasize that we will equip all our attendees with the tools to make these visits go smoothly. It's not too early to start advocating for our future patients and I think this is a really great experience.

Unger: You're right. It is not too early, it's the time to learn right now. That kind of training is really invaluable in something you can get from being part of the AMA. Well, let's talk a little bit about some of the issues that are top of mind for these discussions with legislators.

Ikwuagwu: Yes, so one of the first issues that we will be focusing on is fixing prior authorization. The reason why this is such a big deal is because we have found that the administrative burdens of prior authorization for our patients, for our physicians, sorry, pardon me, is kind of taking away from patient care.

So we can't learn medicine in a vacuum. We need to go beyond the classroom and clinical rotations to also learn the realities of everyday practice. Which is why we chose to kind of focus on prior authorization and the difficulties that it has made for our patients and getting the care that they deserve.
Unger: It's such an important issue and when I talk to other audiences about the difficulties of being a physician today, that's one of the key ones. You start with coverage and then when you have somebody there, getting authorization for the recommended treatment, and that can be extremely time-consuming and very frustrating and really get in the way of patient care.

On a different topic, one of the big things that's happened of course over the pandemic is the emergence of telemedicine and just how crucial that is to providing access and better care for patients. We're going to see training at the upcoming conference about how to advocate for telemedicine. Why don't you talk a little bit about why it's so important for students to be able to advocate for this?

Ikwuagwu: Yes, as medical students, I look at it as if we've been given a new learning opportunity and how we give patients care via telehealth. I've personally had the opportunity in my clinical rotations to do telehealth visits and I think it's really important because we've seen how because of the pandemic we've had to pivot into giving more care through telemedicine methods.

I mean, this is a very key advocacy issue for our medical students, because this will shape care in the future, and as the future physicians, we definitely have a part to play in how this all works out. We need to advocate for a reliable telehealth payment, get educated on issues such as audio only versus audio or video and what fair and reasonable coverage means. So, this is just a very hot topic that I think medical students definitely should be part of the conversation.

Unger: Well, speaking of hot topics, one of the big things that happened at the end of 2021 was the kind of narrowly averted Medicare payment crisis. This is something that might not affect a student right now but when you look at this going forward in practice, it's such an important thing. Through the work of the AMA and the Federation, we were able to avert that. When you talk to other medical students, is this kind of top of mind in terms of something that they really need to be invested in right now too?

Ikwuagwu: Yes, I mean, Medicare reform is important because you really need to get out of this cycle of trying to overt cuts, right? So, this is an opportunity to reimagine the current system that we as medical students will eventually be a part of. We're already facing an impending physician shortage and cuts like these can lead to fewer primary care providers, limited access to specialists, a disruption and care and additional barriers to lifesaving treatment. This can all really greatly affect access and how we provide care for our future patients, which as medical students is really important to us.

Unger: Brittany, how can other medical students learn more and register for the conference including the legislator meetings?

Ikwuagwu: So again, this virtual conference will be taking place March 3-4, with the virtual field visits being on the fourth. You can register and learn more about the conference at ama-assn.org/mac,

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that's M-A-C. You can also find a direct link in the description of this episode. Again, the deadline is soon. The registration deadline is February 15 for all conference activities, including the legislator meetings.

Remember that it is a requirement to attend the events on March 3 to be able to participate with the meetings on the fourth but there will be a phase two registration through March 2 for programming only. Also, if you're a medical student and you would like to submit an excuse letter of absence, that's also something available to our students on the website.

**Unger:** For students that can't make the conference itself but really want to be involved more in advocacy, what are some of the other opportunities for them?

**Ikwuagwu:** Yes, there's a lot of opportunities within the AMA Medical Student Section, a section that I'm so proud to be a part of. If you go to our website, you can kind of see a lot of the different leadership opportunities and events that are open to medical students. If you are kind of interested to learn more of what I do as a GRAF, we also have application for the next GRAFs coming up, the deadline is February 28. You can also be able to access information on that on the AMA Medical Student Section website.

**Unger:** Well, those would be some pretty big shoes to fill, Brittany. You've put so much energy and enthusiasm into this, and I know that this conference is kind of like the Super Bowl for you, so good luck. I encourage all the students out there to please check out more information and don't forget that deadline coming up next week for the Hill visits.

That wraps up today's Moving Medicine video and podcast. Don't miss an episode. You can subscribe to all of them by clicking on that link on YouTube or checking out all our videos and podcasts at ama-assn.org/podcasts. Thanks for joining us and please take care.

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