Medical student leadership shapes the future of medicine with Haidn Foster, MD

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 discusses the AMA Medical Student Section’s 50th anniversary and how medical students can get involved and help shape the future of medicine with Haidn Foster, MD, chair of the AMA Medical Student Section and now a resident physician at Penn State Health in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

Learn more about the AMA Medical Student Section.

Speaker

- Haidn Foster, MD, chair, Medical Student Section, AMA

Transcript

Unger: Hello. This is the American Medical Association's Moving Medicine video and podcast. Today we’re joined by Dr. Haidn Foster, chair of the AMA Medical Student Section or MSS, and now a resident physician at Penn State Health in Hershey, Pennsylvania, to discuss the Medical Student Section's 50th anniversary and how medical students can get involved. I’m Todd Unger, AMA’s chief experience officer in Chicago.
Well, last time when we originally scheduled to talk to you, it was just Haidn but now it's Dr. Foster. So, let me just start by saying congratulations on your upcoming residency. I know this is a really exciting time, and especially also this year that the AMA Medical Student Section is celebrating 50 years since its inception. For those who might not be familiar, can you start by giving us a brief overview of what the section is and why it's so important?

Dr. Foster: Well, thank you, Todd, it's great to be here representing the AMA Medical Student Section or as many of our students know it, the MSS. As a section of the AMA, the purpose of the MSS is to represent the views and interests of medical students across the country. And that commitment is reflected in our over 50,000 medical student members, each of whom has the opportunity to write policy that advances the goals of trainees in public health. But our mission goes beyond policy, empowering our members to develop and attend educational programs and to grow as leaders in organized medicine.

I know that I speak for many of our more senior MSS leaders when I say how excited I am for our return to in-person meetings for the first time in two years. Because the opportunity for our students to experience one of the most fundamental benefits of membership in the AMA, the ability to meet and expand your network of fellow medical students, physicians and leaders in every aspect of medical practice, I believe it's that sense of community in addition to the opportunities to advocate for our peers and our patients. That's the real reason I know so many of our members choose to spend their time and energy in the MSS.

Unger: Well, I am also excited about seeing everybody live this year for the first time in a couple of years and get to know a whole new group of students as well. Students come into their AMA experience for lots of different reasons. Let's talk a little bit about how students can tailor their experience to what drives them personally and how does that guide your own work with the section?

Dr. Foster: Absolutely Todd. In the MSS, students are able to find their voice and advocate for their passions, whether your interests lie in medical education reform, optimization of health care delivery or any number of other issues, the AMA Medical Student Section really affords the opportunity for our members to advance new policy, serve on specialized committees on topics ranging from global and public health to minority issues, to health IT and to develop educational materials such as podcasts and seminars that can really change the conversation on an issue.

So, just as an example, several years ago, when I served on the MSS standing committee on the LGBTQ affairs, I was able to propose and help organize a widely attended panel of physician and bioethics experts who discussed the issue of surgery on infants with differences in sex development. That session built on and fed back into the policy I authored with other students to strengthen protections for gender and sexual minority patients and bolster LGBTQ curriculum and medical education. That's really just a small slice of the possibilities available to our members but it highlights the meaningful impact that students can have on the issues that matter most to them.
Unger: And that is the policy-making that occurs at the House of Delegates. Of course, is a big reason why people are coming to Chicago in the coming weeks. And I know personally you have huge interest in the issues around advocacy. I think a lot of people out there might be surprised by how much policy really originates in the AMA’s Medical Students Section. And that’s a historical thing as well. What achievements really stand out to you during your time with the MSS and what was that experience like?

Dr. Foster: Well, you’re right. The Medical Student Section is a policy powerhouse within the AMA. You can actually see some of our biggest policy wins highlighted on the AMA MSS 50th anniversary webpage. And those include establishing the AMA’s position that racism is a threat to public health. Our instrumental role in changing Step One to pass/fail and eliminating the clinical skills portion of Step Two and, of course, the many advances in LGBTQ policy that I highlighted earlier. And each and every time one of these milestones is passed through our AMA, it’s so meaningful to know that students were at the forefront of this policy work. Policy that originated in the Medical Student Section has resulted in letters to government agencies, testimony in front of congressional committees, national news coverage and ultimately shifts to the public debate in favor of more common sense medical education and more equitable delivery of health care.

Unger: Well, you mentioned milestone and 50 years is a big one. Yet the MSS has only been around for a small portion of the overall AMA's history, which is celebrating its 175th anniversary this year. Why do you think that is? Why have we seen medical students' role in the profession evolve over time?

Dr. Foster: Well, I believe that more and more that our profession is coming to appreciate the voice and the value that trainees bring to the table when it comes to issues of equity, medical education and so much more. Of course, it helps that medical students are consistently at the cutting edge of policy and really act as a driving force, bringing the house of medicine more squarely in line with the values of our nation's medical professionals and our patients. Since the establishment of a section within the AMA dedicated to representing the medical student voice, we've seen the MSS grow in its size and its impact to match the most influential stakeholders within this organization. That's a testament both to our incredibly impressive students, as well as to the responsiveness of the AMA in addressing the issues and concerns of our future physicians.

Unger: Dr. Foster, I'd love to know and hear ideas for how you'd like to see the profession better support students who'd like to engage in important work outside of their standard school curriculum.

Dr. Foster: You know, I think it's incredibly important for our profession and our educators to understand that health does not begin and end at the bedside or in the clinic. In the same way that research can form the foundation for advances in health and therapeutics, the advocacy and education of organized medicine forms a foundation for advances in legislation and public health messaging that can profoundly influence the well-being of our communities. It's really not enough for
medical students to engage in this work theoretically in the classroom. We know what our national dialogue can look like without the deep well of experience and expertise that our physician and medical student voices bring to the debate. So as our educational institutions and other medical organizations come to realize the tangible benefits of student involvement and organized medicine, I look forward to seeing the culture continue to shift in a way that prioritizes AMA conferences equally with research symposia and resolutions equally with other types of peer-reviewed publications.

Unger: Well, I know a lot of other students out there are really interested in the same things that you are, advocacy, policy making but they don't really know where to start. Tell us a little bit about your own journey to becoming the chair of the MSS, what that look like and what's your advice to others out there who want to follow a similar path?

Dr. Foster: Well, you're right, with the section as large as the MSS and with so many diverse opportunities, it can be difficult to identify the best way to first get involved. So my own journey in the AMA began the same way as many other students by really just being thrust into my first national meeting and looking around in awe of the incredible, passionate and knowledgeable medical students, making a difference through their advocacy. It was from that first meeting that I was hooked. I started by becoming a leader in my own local campus section at the University of Cincinnati, then expanded that involvement by serving on one of the MSS standing committees. And that's really where I'd recommend beginning, by identifying the students at your own medical school who are already involved with the AMA and may be able to help show you the ropes, and then finding students with similar interests in one of our standing committees, using that experience to develop your eye for policy or simply get to know other students who share your passions.

One of the great aspects of the MSS is what I like to think of as a sort of leadership ladder. At every level of our organization, there are ways to get involved and grow into whatever sort of leader you want to be. Whether it's within your own medical school, your state or region, nationally within the MSS or even select student roles outside of our section, including serving on the AMA House of Delegates on one of our councils or even the board of trustees. That ladder of opportunity exists to help you on your journey to reach even the highest rungs of leadership in the AMA. Of course, if you have any questions, as you start to take that journey in organized medicine, I, and so many other student leaders, will always be available to provide advice and encouragement along the way.

Unger: Well, one particular area that you've been really passionate about as MSS chair is making the section more inclusive and accessible to all medical students. Tell us a little bit more about those efforts and how students can join this section if they're interested.

Dr. Foster: You're right. Todd, thank you for highlighting this important work. We are always striving as a section, to be as inclusive as possible for all medical students. Some of the exciting advances we've recently achieved on this front include forming two new standing committees focused on American Indian and disability affairs and more closely collaborating with other national organizations.
that represent medical students from minoritized backgrounds, such as the Student National Medical Association or the Association of Native American Medical Students. We’ve also been hard at work to make our meetings more accessible. So in the past year, we’ve been able to offer a new scholarship to minoritized students, to attend our national meetings. And I’ll be testifying in our House of Delegates in June to pass policy I wrote, that would prompt the AMA to study additional mechanisms for defraying costs for medical students attending these meetings.

Finally, it's hard to overstate the role of technology in lowering the barriers to engagement with our section. So as we plan to return to in-person meetings, many of our leaders within the MSS are thinking deeply about ways to incorporate asynchronous and virtual means of participation into future meetings. So, if you want to learn more about the benefits of joining the AMA and everything you'll receive as a medical student member, I'd invite you to visit the AMA's website, click that join button. All student AMA members automatically become members of the MSS. And when you join, I look forward to meeting you and seeing everything you accomplish in our section.

**Unger:** Well, I think that is great advice, Dr. Foster, to other medical students out there. We hope to see you all participating. Just before we close, any final thoughts on what this anniversary means to you personally and the profession as a whole?

**Dr. Foster:** Yeah, 50 years of medical students having a strong and sustained voice within the American Medical Association is truly a legacy to celebrate. This anniversary reflects the mutual benefit that the AMA provides medical students in amplifying their priorities as trainees and future physicians, as well as the benefit students bring to the AMA. Today, I've talked about the important policy work of our section, the education our members provide within the MSS and the physicians throughout the organization, and the networking and lifelong friendships that come from joining America's largest and most influential medical association. So, it's through your engagement with this work that we truly move medicine.

**Unger:** Dr. Foster, we hear a lot from medical students about concerns about distinguishing themselves as they approach applying for residencies. And since you've successfully done that yourself, I'm curious how leadership positions in the AMA help prepare you and help distinguish you as a candidate.

**Dr. Foster:** You know, there are so many different leadership opportunities that are available to students to choose, to engage with our organization, as well as all the many opportunities I talked about in aspects of medical education, of policy writing and on and on down the line. I know for me personally, when I had those types of interviews with different residency programs across the country, it was a consistent point that we came back to. Those interviewers were extremely interested in the types of leadership positions and the policy that I was able to advance through the Medical Student Section of the AMA. And it really set me apart from so many other students who didn't have that breadth of experience. Of course, you don't need to be the chair of the Medical Student Section or at
any sort of extremely high national leadership positions to set yourself apart in the same way. It's through that grassroots involvement in our section, that you will simply, by getting involved and starting to make those inroads into our organization, that you can really set yourself apart from many other candidates on the interview trail.

Unger: That's great. Dr. Foster, thank you so much for being here today. And congratulations to you and so happy for the MSS celebrating its 50th anniversary. That's it for today's episode. We'll be back with another segment soon. In the meantime, find all our videos and podcasts at ama-assn.org/podcasts. Thanks for joining us.

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