

Q&A: Why this medical student leader is an AMA member for life

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In his final days as chair of the AMA Medical Student Section, Haidn Foster, MD, took time to share the lessons he has learned in his years as a medical student and advocate. Formerly a medical student at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, Dr. Foster will begin his internal medicine residency at the Penn State Health Milton S. Hershey Medical Center in July.

Dr. Foster follows a decades-long tradition of outstanding future physician leaders cultivated in part through their involvement with AMA Medical Student Section (AMA-MSS), which is marking its 50th anniversary. Here are some of Dr. Foster's thoughts as he considered the transition from student to physician and how his role as an advocate might evolve.

AMA: As you complete your final days as a medical student leader within the AMA, what did your involvement with AMA-MSS teach you about the role that medical students play as advocates and their power to be change agents?

Dr. Foster: It's hard to overstate the power of medical students to move medicine through their advocacy. Over just the past five years that I've been a member of the AMA, medical students have been instrumental in establishing the AMA's position that racism is a threat to public health, making strides toward more commonsense evaluations in medical education and encouraging strong standards of LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula throughout medical school.

The AMA Center for Health Equity was founded during my time in the MSS, largely as a result of policy championed by medical students that has strengthened our organizational focus on diversity, equity and inclusion.

The Medical Student Section has always been uniquely concerned with issues of patient care and public health, and that commitment is reflected in the ways medical students have sought to make the AMA a more just and inclusive space for students and physicians as well as a more vocal advocate for

equitable patient care.

AMA: You had quite a few roles in the section before becoming chair. What was your initial interest in the AMA?**Dr. Foster:** I became interested in the AMA during my first year in medical school. A group of students from my local campus section were making the trip to Chicago for [the AMA] Annual Meeting, and I really just tagged along to learn more about the organization. In that way, I think my story mirrors that of so many other students:

Once you get into that big ballroom and see your fellow students advocating on issues that they care deeply about, and then realize that advocacy can actually effect change throughout the organization and even the rest of the country, that's when I got hooked, and I've been involved ever since.

AMA: What are some of the section's accomplishments you are most proud of?**Dr. Foster:** I'm incredibly proud of the MSS' role in helping to make the AMA and American health care, more equitable and patient-centered. Our focus on racial justice, for example, has really moved the needle, and we're only just getting started.

One additional aspect of equity that holds special significance for me is LGBTQ+ health. So much of my own work in the AMA has been dedicated to ensuring that patients of all sexualities, gender identities and differences in sex development are able to receive accessible, culturally and clinically competent care.

It's been incredibly meaningful to play a role in the strong tradition of students being at the vanguard of advocacy for historically marginalized patients, and I'm proud to have worked on policy that will help LGBTQ+ patients receive the best possible care and educate tomorrow's physicians about LGBTQ+ health.

AMA: How do you see yourself continuing to work in those arenas, perhaps more clinically, as a resident physician?

Dr. Foster: From my earliest days in medical school, I was privileged to work with physician mentors who prioritized LGBTQ+-inclusive health care. It was from those physicians that I first learned to be an advocate for my patients in the clinic. When I'm lucky enough to be someone else's doctor during residency, I know my early training will help me speak up for that patient within the care team and seek out the most up-to-date screening and treatment guidelines that I may otherwise have been unaware of.

AMA: You got involved in organized medicine early in your medical school career. Why would you encourage other medical students to do the same?

Dr. Foster: As the voice of America’s doctors and medical students, the AMA is uniquely positioned to help students reach their advocacy goals, and involvement in the AMA is the best way I can think of to have a significant impact on issues of medical education and public health. No other medical organization has both the influence of AMA in the town square and on Capitol Hill as well as a proven history of supporting and amplifying student voices and priorities.

The ability to get involved in your first year as a member—to take on leadership roles or start writing policy, to develop programming that educates students and physicians alike—that’s a special opportunity afforded by the AMA that helps today’s trainees grow into tomorrow’s leaders, all while actually making a difference for our patients.

And within the Medical Student Section, we’ve been very intentional in working to craft a clear path for new members to onboard and advance within the organization from local campus section to regional and national positions. Throughout the MSS, we’ve cultivated such a supportive and welcoming environment. It’s always a joy to see our veteran members encouraging first-year students to run for a position—any position—and cheer them on as they succeed and kick off their journey within the AMA.

AMA: Has your involvement with the AMA changed your career trajectory?

Dr. Foster: The AMA got me to think seriously about the role physicians can play in bettering health outside of the clinic. This organization changed how I think about advocacy, leadership, and health policy, and it made me a believer in the power of organized medicine to shape the future of health care.

I came to the AMA as first-year medical student and found an organization that I will be involved with for life.

I know now that the sort of policy work and leadership roles I’ve taken on within the AMA will be a staple throughout my career, and I’m excited to see the impact my graduating class—and future medical students—are able to have in the AMA going forward.

AMA: How do you see your role as an advocate changing as your transition to residency?

Dr. Foster: The Medical Student Section occupies this unique space within the AMA as a consistent voice bringing the conversation back to the patients we serve.

Part of this is due to how generous, inclusive, and thoughtful our students really are. But, of course, there are arenas in which medical students just don’t typically have the lived experience to meaningfully contribute—whether that be issues of graduate medical education, billing, or clinical best practice.

So as a resident, something I'm looking forward to is engaging on topics such as improving graduate medical training and bolstering protections for resident physicians, while maintaining the focus on patient and community health that I first developed in the MSS.