Voter registration and health care with Vot-ER

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Featured topic and speakers

In today’s COVID-19 Update, for #CivicHealthMonth this August, a discussion on how voting influences health and why it’s important for physicians to get involved in voting advocacy. AMA Chief Experience Officer and host, Todd Unger, is joined by Aliya Bhatia, executive director of Vot-ER in Washington, D.C., and Jasmin Eatman, an MD and PhD candidate at Emory in Atlanta—and Vot-ER intern.

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Speaker

- Aliya Bhatia, executive director, Vot-ER
- Jasmin Eatman, MD/PhD student, Emory and Vot-ER intern

Transcript

Unger: Hello, this is the American Medical Association's COVID-19 Update. Today we have a special episode on how voting influences health and why it's important for physicians to get involved in voting advocacy. I'm joined today by Aliya Bhatia, executive director of Vot-ER in Washington, D.C., and Jasmin Eatman, an MD and PhD candidate at Emory in Atlanta and a Vot-ER intern. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer in Chicago. Aliya and Jasmin, it's a pleasure to have you.
Eatman: Thanks, Todd.

Bhatia: Thanks, Todd. Such a pleasure to be here with you.

Unger: Well, before we get into Vot-ER and its mission, I want to start by talking about something people might not expect in terms of relationship and that's between voting and health. Why don't we start there, Aliya, with the connection and why it's so important.

Bhatia: Todd, we're so excited to be here with you to share about voting, health and how AMA members around the country can get involved in this. When I was living in Atlanta, I went on a ride along with our local emergency medical services.

And after seeing so many of the things that emergency medical services staff, the EMTs, the ambulances, what they were facing and responding to in community, I got really overwhelmed by the myriad of different challenges that a very, very lean group of people were having to tackle. And at the end, I asked the manager if you can only change one thing, what would you change? And he said, "Oh if I can only change one thing, if all my patients voted, then we would make sure that there was enough affordable housing for everyone, we would make sure there what's healthy food in every neighborhood and what I needed to get people an ambulance, I could afford to do that."

And it was a month later that I heard about this organization, Vot-ER and it turns out that his intuition is backed by research at the global, state, national and local levels. And one example where we can see it very clearly is with the opioid epidemic. There are going to be a set of opioid settlement funds where the decisions that are made about how we use those funds, and how effective they will be used are going to be made by local and state officials, most of whom will be elected this fall. So really, really vivid example of this relationship between our vote and our health.

Unger: That makes sense. We just talked to our former chair of the AMA board of trustees, Dr. Bobby Mukkamala about that very issue. And so that resonates a lot based on that discussion. I don't think maybe people understand that voting is a public health issue. And never before in the face of a global pandemic have we seen that be more important. Jasmin, what's your perspective on this connection as a medical student? Is this something that you're learning about in medical school? My guess is maybe not. And should it be part of the standard curriculum if it isn't?

Eatman: Well yeah, Todd. I appreciate that question in particular, because at this stage of my training and my career, I am really trying to glean everything I can from my education. And I think there is room for voting to be more integrated into the curriculum and especially the conversations that we have with our patients on voting.

One of the things that I think is really important is that not only do we discussed this in the medical school curriculum, discuss the importance of voting but make it practical for medical students to really
deliver this information in a way that is relatable, impactful, efficient and also nonpartisan, which is something that Vot-ER is committed to, and a reason why I’m involved and passionate about my involvement in the organization.

The AMC actually released recommendations recently for medical training medical students, as well as residents and beyond on how to discuss this with patients. It gets into some of the legal ramifications of this as well and gives really practical advice on that. And I think that the more that medical schools can really follow that lead and take the information that is provided to be able to impart that into our curriculum would be really important and beneficial for students.

This is an important issue not only for our patients but for ourselves as medical providers. Because as Aliya mentioned, this directly impacts how well we can do our jobs. And medical students are always encouraged to spend more time with patients, get to know their stories. And part of what we can do also while we’re getting that information from them is imparting information on how they can make their voices heard.

**Unger:** OK. Aliyah, you mentioned back earlier in the conversation, and that kind of connection that you made in your kind of right along there, and discovery about Vot-ER and then making that connection. Let's talk a little bit more about what Vote ER does, and how it started.

**Bhatia:** Yeah, our founder is an emergency room doctor at Massachusetts General Hospital. And after seeing patients and challenges that patients were facing that he couldn't solve with a prescription, he founded Vot-ER to provide medical professionals voter registration resources. And today, along with a growing movement of organizations, including Civic Health Alliance, Patient Voting, Healthy Democracy Healthy People and many more, we advanced the vision of healthy community is powered by an inclusive democracy.

Vot-ER a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that integrates civic engagement into health care. We create nonpartisan civic engagement tools like this one, which can be fit into any corner of the health care system, private practitioners, medical students, like Jasmin, hospitals and beyond. And we worked together across the country with health care professionals and clinical students in our work.

The process is one of those that allows for health professionals to integrate this as they see fit in their work. It can be as simple as a question that they add to their exam conversation around “Are you registered to vote, and if not, can I help?” The QR code basically takes you to a landing page that allows patients to register to vote in a handful of minutes and can be really smoothly integrated into the process.

**Unger:** I got to ask you a question because what we hear constantly from physicians is they don’t have enough time in that exam room with the patient. They're under a lot of time pressure. How
practical is it to add a question and not just any question but a question about voting to what is already a very constricted amount of time?

**Eatman:** Yeah, well as a medical student who is under a whole lot of time pressure when I am with patients, and needs to get all the important information but also share the important information, I find that it's really streamlined, especially the fact that there is a QR code that the patient can scan really quickly, and then do the registration if they need to on their own time. It's really just to get a conversation started.

I find that a really simple way to get the conversation going is just asking, are you registered to vote? Or asking a patient, what is your experience voting been like, which can give a little bit of insight into whether or not they're voting, and what their opinions are or feelings are about it. Super streamline and I'm really grateful that I found Vot-ER as a medical student so that I could incorporate the badge into my practice and my developing practice.

**Unger:** What kind of response do you get when you ask a patient about voting? I don't think that's probably a question they're expecting.

**Eatman:** It varies. We find—and I think that this is something that people feel but may not really understand, that there has been data that has been collected about the way that doctors, nurses, other allied health professionals are really trusted kind of figures in people's lives. And it means a lot to be asked that question.

It doesn't sound like the regular questions that you would get at the doctor’s office, like, are you exercising, are you eating well? And it kind of does pique folks' interest. I find that some folks respond really well to it. I've also heard some really difficult stories about issues of voter access when I do start those conversations. But I always feel that they're worthwhile to have. And the more that we can have them, the more patients can let us know what their needs are.

**Bhatia:** Todd, if I could add one thing in, I have the pleasure of hearing from a lot of our different health professionals across the country. And we hear that being able to talk about voting is often uplifting in their work. And this quote really struck me from a recent conversation. One of our health professionals said, "There's only so many prescriptions I can write and still see people for the same issues. Vote ER helps me feel like I'm actually doing what my career and degree said that I would do." And so there's a lot of also positive ... for the health professionals getting to be involved in this work.

**Unger:** Aliya, how many hospitals and physicians are involved in the effort? And how many voters have you registered today?

**Bhatia:** Yeah, we have in addition to the relationship that Jasmin mentioned with the Association of American Medical Colleges, also incredibly strong relationships with the American Academy of
Pediatrics, the National Association of Community Health Centers. We work in all 50 states with about 500 hospitals and clinics through the work of 25,000 health care professionals, have partners, including Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Atrium Health and so many more. And in 2020, we were fortunate to support 48,000 Americans with voter registration and mail-in ballots during a time where showing up at the polls was something that you had to think about in context of health decisions around COVID. And we really helped people vote in a safe and healthy way during the pandemic.

Unger: Jasmin, tell us a little bit more about what's happening on the medical school front.

Eatman: Well, medical schools are increasingly involved in this work. Vot-ER has really created a coalition over a number of years to really emphasize the importance of this issue and the fact that medical schools ought to start being involved in the conversation so that they don't get left behind. As an Emory University School of Medicine and School of Public Health student, as an MD, PhD student, I find that it's really important that different aspects of the University are involved in this, not only offices of civic engagement but School of Medicine administrative offices to really have a united message. It really helps students to not only understand the importance of this work but to feel supported and to feel encouraged in doing so.

The Vot-ER organization actually has a way for medical students to really be involved and kind of speaks to our competitive nature sometimes. The healthy democracy campaign is an opportunity for medical students to form teams and to actually use their badges in the field in the hospital and the clinical setting to get patients registered, and to kind of see how they can get more patients registered than other schools and be competitive in that way, always healthy competition, of course. And so the importance of our participation in this space of medical students, other trainees who have more time with patients who are really sometimes more so peers with younger patients and can kind of have the conversation in a different way. And it's really, really important and helpful for me as I increase my awareness of how I can be involved in this.

Unger: And so what would you have to say to physicians who they might be hesitant to get involved? Maybe they feel like it's not their business or they would be pushing an agenda. Aliya, why don't you start?

Bhatia: We found that when it comes to the relationship between voting and health, it actually doesn't matter who you vote for. More voting is associated with better health outcomes. And as a rigorously nonpartisan organization, we work with our advisors across the political spectrum to ensure that resources are not partisan and that they speak to the daily experiences of Americans in their health.

As you mentioned earlier, given everything on health professionals' plate, you might wonder if an extra task like this feels like a burden. And when we ask our health professionals through surveys, conversations, what we find is that they're uplifted by this work and the opportunity to make a transformative impact.
Unger: Jasmin, anything to add to that?

Eatman: Absolutely. So the AMA is involved in this space and actually has widened our lane. And I was part of a group of medical students and other health professionals, and physicians across the country to pass a resolution called “Voting as a Social Determinant of Health,” which was passed to the AMA’s House of Delegates this summer actually. We spent a lot of time and energy actually gathering data to support this relationship between voting and health outcomes. And as Aliya alluded to, it is not only found to have a relation to voting, rather, it’s not only found to have a relationship with health outcomes but also helps patients feel like they’re part of a community, right?

I know with the COVID-19 pandemic it has been so difficult to still maintain that feeling and not feeling alone, knowing that your physician has your back and making your voice heard, being labeled a likely voter so that campaigns are interested in being on your team, and getting more food access or access to health insurance is really important. And so that resolution has really I think, galvanized our medical community and is really exciting to see play out in different ways. I will also just say to that, that really, the work of legislation is physicians and medical professionals plane as well, and really getting that message out there and making it standard across our field and in our society.

Unger: Well, this is a perfect time to be having this conversation, because August is Civic Health Month, which you may not know about. Why don't you tell us a little bit more about this? And just in closing, what can physicians do to get involved, Aliya?

Bhatia: Thank you, Todd. We celebrate Civic Health Month every August. It’s a time for uplifting and celebrating the link that Jasmin mentioned between voting and health. And it’s a time to ensure that each and every voter is able to use their voice at the ballot box to shape the health of their communities. Individual health professionals can get a badge like this one at Vot-ER.org/badge. And then we provide training, conversation starters and more to make it incredibly simple and easy for health professionals to get involved.

Our hospitals, clinics, associations and other associations can become Civic Health partners, CivicHealthMonth.org. And in addition to health professionals receiving free badges, these organizations can prepare for a very important day in September called National Voter Registration Day, a day that’s really designated for health organizations to be able to uplift—for organizations across the country, including health organizations, to uplift the importance of voter access and voter registration.

Unger: Excellent. Jasmin, any final words before we wrap up?

Eatman: I just want to say that voting is a social determinant of health. Voting is an important part of our toolkit, and as providers, and making sure that patients have a chance to lead their healthiest, most productive, happiest lives. And I'm really honored to be part of this conversation and just want to
encourage anyone, medical students, trainees, especially, to be involved in this conversation and feel empowered to help our patients make their voices heard.

**Unger:** Excellent. Aliya, Jasmin, thanks so much for being here. We've got information about how to reach Vot-ER in the description of this particular episode. So please check that out. We'll be back soon with another episode. And also make sure to watch for some exciting programming changes in the AMA's COVID Update, which will be debuting on September 6.

In the meantime, you can find all our videos and podcasts at ama-assn.org/podcasts. Thanks for joining us. Please take care.

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