Another question for patients: Are you registered to vote?

SEP 1, 2022

Kevin B. O'Reilly
News Editor

With voter-registration deadlines for the November elections fast approaching, physicians and medical students now have a new way to engage patients in quick, productive and nonpartisan discussions about how to take part in the electoral process.

The House of Delegates in June updated AMA policy to acknowledge that “voting is a social determinant of health and significantly contributes to the analyses of other social determinants of health as a key metric.”

Emory University MD-PhD student Jasmin Eatman was part of the effort to update that policy, and she appeared this week on “AMA Moving Medicine” with Aliya Bhatia, who is executive director of Vot-ER. About 25,000 doctors and other health professionals have worked with Vot-ER, and anyone in such a role can order a free Vot-ER badge, which includes a QR code that patients with smartphones can scan to complete the voter-registration process on their own time.

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

Physician-driven effort

Vot-ER was founded by an emergency physician and more than 500 hospitals and clinics have worked with the nonprofit, nonpartisan organization to help nearly 50,000 Americans with voter registration and mail-in ballots, Bhatia said. The organization partners with the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Association of Community Health Centers and others.
While time is always a precious commodity for physicians and medical students, Vot-ER suggests simple conversation-starters to squeeze in when possible.

“This is an important issue not only for our patients but for ourselves,” said Eatman, the Emory medical student. “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.”

Vot-ER also offers a help line to patients who have trouble with the online voter-registration process.

Learn more with the AMA about why it’s OK for doctors to ask their patients about voting.

**How patients respond**

Eatman, an intern at Vot-ER, has seen a variety of patient responses to inquiries about voting.

“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,” she said, noting that some patients have shared “really difficult stories about issues of voter access when I do start those conversations.”

Eatman said she believes such conversations are always “worthwhile to have—and the more that we can have them, the more patients can let us know what their needs are.”

“AMA Moving Medicine” highlights innovation and the emerging issues that impact physicians and public health today. You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version, which also features educational presentations and in-depth discussions.