



The Renewed Importance of Politics in Medicine Today

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ACG Board of Trustees

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The recent healthcare policy changes in the United States have necessitated an increased focus on the impact to our specialty and delivery of patient care. This requires the need for an increased presence of physician input with our state and federal legislators. Our input on the potential consequences of decisions being evaluated by our legislators has never been more important, both at the federal and state level. Most of these decisions are made at the federal level with rules and regulations being established in Washington D.C. While your elected official may not be directly involved in many of these matters, your interaction with your Senator and Representative is still the important first link. My goals with this paper will be simple:

- Know who or what agency is in control of the decision-making regarding patient care.
- How to set up initial contact with your Congressman/Senator.
- Provide guidelines on setting up a meeting with your Congressman/Senator.
- Provide simple guidelines on how to get your message across at your meetings.
- How to maintain open lines of communication with your legislators and their staff.
- The importance of participating in local events.

Who is Making the Decisions?

I cannot emphasize this point enough: First impressions matter in politics. Before contacting your elected officials, you need to do a thorough fact-check of the topics. If you intend to discuss a new bill make sure you have a copy of the bill and read it prior to making contact. Know how the legislator has voted on similar bills in the past and how they are leaning on the subject matter of this piece of legislation. Your goal is to offer your reasons for support or opposition of the bill with important information and arguments if necessary to back up your points. It is important that you are specific about aspects of the bill that may be beneficial or harmful to patient care. Be prepared to offer some form of alteration of the bill to correct the problems as you see them. Never simply say “it is a bad bill” or “don’t vote for it.”

Examining the possibility of change in current law can be altogether different. After all, you are no longer discussing a bill that is up for vote you are discussing changes to approved law. You have to know who or what agency within the Federal Government is in charge of implementing the law, as well as what regulatory authority agencies have to implement and oversee the law.

For example, agencies within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) are in charge of most of the governance of Medicare and Medicaid healthcare decisions. When it comes to changing current aspects of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (now known as the ACA), Congress can pass new laws to alter the current law, CMS has authority to change certain aspects of the implementation of the law (but within very specific limitations), or the Director of HHS can make certain changes within the regulatory authority prescribed in the ACA. While your Congressman may not have direct influence on these matters, many changes must come about by new legislation. If your Congressman happens to be involved in committee work in these areas you should know that but also understand the limitations of the committee itself.

Initial Contact with Your Elected Official

In setting up your initial contact with your Representative or Senator there are a few simple measures to follow.

First, look at his or her web page and get background information on their personal and professional background. Look for common bonds that help in making a connection or conversation. Next, obtain more information regarding their voting background. You may get help on this from the ACG office or your state medical society. Most importantly, make it clear who you are and who you represent. If you are a Governor for the ACG then make this clear early on in this communication. If the contact you are making is at the state level, you will find your state medical society will help you as they are looking for interested physicians as well.

The initial contact can be achieved via various means. If you are a Governor for the ACG, the legislative “fly in” is the easiest first meeting. The ACG will schedule these meetings for you and provide you with talking points and materials prior to these meetings. If possible, contact the office of the individual Representative or Senator and give them a bit of background information on yourself. This is an effective reminder if you have been to their office before. Many of the staff on Capitol Hill have little to no experience with gastroenterologists, so include basic information on what a gastroenterologist is, your practice setting, and patient demographics (Medicare, Medicaid, private insurance, charity care) as well as areas of expertise or commonly performed services. If you are a Governor for the ACG, include the number of ACG-members practicing in your state if available. It is important that you make it clear that you are not coming to visit simply for your personal reasons but as an elected delegate representing numerous physicians and patients -- and constituents -- in their district and state. If available, it is helpful to coordinate with a local political interest group that includes physicians from other specialty areas and primary care. Make it clear that your goal is to establish a working relationship with your Congressman in order to provide insight into the impact of legislation from the local physician, patient, and constituent perspective.

Meeting Arrangements

If you are independently planning to visit Washington, D.C., or your state capital for the purpose of meeting with your legislators, you will need to contact these offices several weeks in advance. Tell them that you are a constituent (or representing their constituents as ACG Governor) and you would like to make an appointment through the office scheduler or legislative staff in charge of healthcare legislation. It may be more effective going directly to the scheduler and asking for an appointment with the Congressman/Senator. The offices will ultimately include the legislative staff responsible for healthcare legislation when setting up these meetings. In doing so, you may actually get added to the Congressman's/Senator's daily schedule of meetings as well as the legislative staff in charge of healthcare legislation. It is important to understand that most meetings will be with legislative staff members and not necessarily the Representative or Senator themselves. These staff members are typically very well versed on the policy matters in question in healthcare and have access to a great deal of background information on the legislative matters at hand. Also, know when Congress is in session or on recess and always include an offer for your legislator to visit your practice when they are at home. This is an important advocacy opportunity for you and great local press opportunity for them. Do not discount the power of local meetings and invitations to your practice.

Getting the Message Across

Messaging may be the most important single aspect of the visit.

The elevator speech: Imagine you are stepping onto an elevator and your Congressman or Senator also happens to be on that elevator. You now have at most two minutes to convince her/him that what you have to say is important enough to spend another 15-20 minutes with you in discussing these topics. In this context, do not over-stack your agenda. Choose two or maybe three important topics. If you are tackling a complicated matter, it may be better to make it the only item for discussion. Try to make your first topic of discussion a simple topic with an easy solution. A few basic handouts stressing your points are important to include in a folder. This provides a reference point and data for staff use when briefing their bosses. If you are participating in an ACG legislative “fly-in” you will be provided with these materials prior to your meetings.

Make sure any data that you provide is correctly and appropriately referenced. It would be a good idea, especially early on, to include in this folder a brief biographical sheet on you including your contact information. Make sure you educate yourself on the points on both sides of the topic and are familiar with the opposing views. This will help you deliver a message that is simple, clear, and concise. Most importantly, make sure that you address the matters in a “patient-centered framework” and not simply how an issue affects you and your reimbursement. Remember that even financial and reimbursement matters may often result in loss of certain services to the patient or even physician availability and not simply your office bottom line. Personal examples or local problems within your own community are very persuasive and carry more meaning than hypothetical examples. This is where knowledge of your profession, and their district/state, is important and most effective.

Remember that you are the substantive policy expert in their district or state in that you see how legislation impacts physicians and patient care. You are on the front line and witness first-hand the impact of these policy changes made in Congress. The Congressman/Senator and staff are the experts in the legislative process seeking a better understanding of the substantive issues. Together you can make a great team.

Forging a Working Relationship

At the conclusion of your visit, make it clear that you want to be relied upon as a resource should questions arise in the future. This is where bringing your personal business card and contact information is very helpful. By making yourself available for future reference for legislative matters, you are providing staff the opportunity to learn first-hand the impact of legislation and current law on patient care in your community and their state/district. Remember that the job of the Congressman is to represent the needs and wellbeing of the people in their district. It is important to send an email to the legislative staff that you met with and thank them for the time spent during the meeting. This will go a long way in opening the lines of communication. As future questions arise, don't hesitate to *intermittently* email these individuals and get their input on what is going on with a particular topic under legislative discussion. If you are able to get a meeting with the Representative or Senator themselves a short handwritten note of thanks is appreciated.

Participation in Local Events

Your participation in local and other events is very important in fostering the relationship with your Congressman and their staff. There are several hard facts related to our legislative and political processes that are a simple part of life. One is that “all politics is local.” It is important for them to foster a relationship with you too. You can invite the elected official to your practice through the official’s state and district staff directors or schedulers. You can also get invited to participate in local events or town-hall meetings by going on their campaign websites to check schedules. Many town hall meetings are announced via your local media channels as well.

Conclusion

Your long-term goal should be to establish yourself as a trusted resource for your legislators, both at the federal and state level, for expertise in medical legislation and healthcare policy. While there are many sources of information that are constantly pumping statistics and editorials to our legislators these are typically slanted toward the author’s opinion or funded through an organization with an agenda. Establish yourself as a resource that can provide the objective, independent view of how legislation affects providers, patients, and constituents. Your reputation as an independent resource will be well appreciated and will go a long way in fostering a positive relationship with staff and elected officials.