Physicians Role in Politics

Involvement Crucial to the Commonwealth

By Ralph Alvarado, MD
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In the immediate world of what most of us would consider “politics,” there are only a select few that we actually see run for a public office. Behind the scenes in Kentucky, there are perhaps only a few thousand volunteers, office workers, and support staff who are also considered part of the political process and often have very important roles in the realm of governance and development of policy. But, this is only a small percentage of our Commonwealth’s overall population; and as physicians, we are perhaps one of the least involved groups in Frankfort. I think our country and our Commonwealth would be in much better shape if everyone were part of the political process.

Physicians are some of the most widely respected, trained, and educated individuals in a community. The lack of involvement of such a group in leadership can only be damaging to a society. So as physicians, we should ask what is our role in the political process?

From an ethical perspective, two principles from the AMA Code of Ethics speak to physician engagement in the democratic process:

• “A physician shall respect the law and also recognize a responsibility to seek changes in those requirements which are contrary to the best interests of the patient.” (Principle #3)
• “A physician shall recognize a responsibility to participate in activities contributing to the improvement of the community and the betterment of public health.” (Principle #7)
• “A physician shall advocate for social, economic, educational, and political changes that ameliorate suffering and contribute to human well being.” (Principle #8)

Each of these highlight the idea that, as physicians, we have an ethical responsibility to contribute to political change that will benefit our patients. But, how do we best accomplish such change?

First, we can begin by voting. There are some who say that the irony of the American democracy is that it is run by an elite but the common idea of one person, one vote does allow the ballot box to be the great equalizer, provided that citizens get the message to vote and that infrastructure exists to make voting easy. I don’t have any research on the percentage of physicians who vote in every election for which they are eligible. However, we know that fewer than 60% of eligible American voters actually cast a ballot. In the last gubernatorial race, the turnout was less than 25%. This small percentage does not give us confidence that there is an informed electorate, willing and able to exercise their freedom to vote. As physicians, we should lead by example and encourage our patients to be more active participants in our democracy.

The second way physicians can get involved in the political process is by contributing to the campaigns of medicine friendly candidates or to political committees. This can help ensure that medicine-friendly politicians get elected. KPPAC is a prime example of such an organization.

As doctors, we’re used to analyzing a problem and finding a quick solution. We then give an order to someone to carry something out and things are ‘fixed.’ That is how our world works. Others value our opinion and leadership and we never have to give money to make our message heard. But unfortunately, whether we like it or not, money is what allows a political message to be disseminated and heard. The money raised is the size of gun with which you fire it.

As you might imagine, sympathetic state and Congressional representatives are crucial to attaining our priority goals -- such as reforming a broken medical liability system, preventing cuts to Medicaid or Medicare payments, and continuing to solve the uninsured problem in America. But involvement is not just a matter of providing financial capital, it is a matter of offering intellectual capital -- and time. Physicians need to get involved with legislators at the grassroots level. Physician activists help get physician-friendly politicians elected, and they also can develop relationships with these politicians who move medicine’s agenda forward.

Legislators crave our input, especially when it comes to medical bills. All too often, I have heard legislators complain that they did not ‘hear from the doctors’ on a certain issue. Only after they voted on something contrary to what we would want did they hear the complaints. By then, the law was enacted and it was ‘too late.’

The final way to get involved entails the most personal sacrifice: running for public office. There are both historical and present-day precedents for physicians on this front. Physicians signed the Declaration of Independence, among them, Dr. Benjamin Rush. These doctors put both their life and fortune at risk to bring a better nation into existence. In communities across the nation, physicians have served on school boards, in city and state governments, as well as in Congress. Dr. Bill Frist served as Senate majority leader. Dr. Rand Paul serves as our US Senator, and Dr. Ben Carson recently ran for President.

However, today, there are proportionally far fewer physician representatives in Congress than there were physician signers of the Declaration of Independence. Among them, Dr. Benjamin Rush. These doctors put both their life and fortune at risk to bring a better nation into existence. In communities across the nation, physicians have served on school boards, in city and state governments, as well as in Congress. Dr. Bill Frist served as Senate majority leader. Dr. Rand Paul serves as our US Senator, and Dr. Ben Carson recently ran for President.

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You, too, can run for public office. AMA has offered Candidate Workshops where you learn how and when to make the decision to run, how to raise funds, and how to be a better public speaker.

Physicians are naturally concerned with the health of their own patients, but to what extent are we also civic-minded? Are we concerned about social and economic issues that affect the health of our patients beyond the doors of our practices? Do we have a responsibility to advocate for public health issues and contribute to the society that grants us professional status? The answer, according to physicians themselves, is yes. A Commonwealth Fund study in 2006 (JAMA) found that nearly all physicians believe they should play public roles, and two-thirds are actively involved in community activities, political work, or
advocacy. The researchers envisioned three types of public roles for physicians: community participation, political involvement in health issues (other than voting), and collective advocacy through professional organizations. 3500 physicians engaged in direct patient care (FP, IM, Peds) or in one of 3 specialties (Gen Surg, Anesth., Cardiology) responded to a mail survey.

When asked to select from a list of factors, most physicians said it was very important to advocate for socioeconomic factors directly related to health: obesity, immunizations, tobacco control, substance abuse. Fewer said that advocating for expansion of insurance coverage was an important issue for them.

To sum up, there are several things we all can do: Vote. Contribute money and/or time as an activist. Support colleagues who are willing to serve in public office. Or, consider running yourself. Most of these are simples “asks” for each of us as physicians. It’s time to act, and it’s also time to reflect on the importance of such action.

We are blessed in this country with many freedoms, including the freedom to practice medicine as we choose. We must be politically involved on a personal level to ensure that future physicians will be able to continue our proud tradition of human health. It is, simply put, the ethical thing to do.

About the Author
Ralph A. Alvarado, MD is an American physician and politician who was elected to the Kentucky State Senate in 2014, and is the first Hispanic member ever elected to the Kentucky General Assembly. He represents Kentucky’s 28th Senate district, which includes Fayette, Clark, and Montgomery counties. He serves as the Vice-chair of the Health & Welfare Committee, Co-chair of Medicaid Oversight Committee, Co-chair of the Budget Review Subcommittee on Human resources, as well as a member of the Senate Appropriations & Revenue Committee, and State & Local Government Committee.

Senator Alvarado earned his bachelor’s degree in biology from Loma Linda University (California) in 1990, and then went on to receive his Doctorate in Medicine in 1994. He completed his medical residency in Internal Medicine and Pediatrics at the University of Kentucky in 1998.