



Guest Director's Corner

In My Shoes: Perspectives on Advocacy, Voting, and Legislation

By Christopher S. Davis, MD, MPH

*"The superior physician rescues the state, whereas the inferior one merely attends to the sick."
-Yi He, third century BC*

My high school English teacher helped me through writer's block with these wise words: "write about what you know." Though I did not grasp the importance at the time, that has guided my writing for years. When reading my colleagues' pieces while pulling together this week's issue of the *Transformational Times*, I was humbly reminded of all we as providers must learn when it comes to advocacy, voting and legislation. This work can be daunting, exhausting, uncomfortable, foreign and frustratingly slow - the pace challenges me the most as a trauma surgeon trained for rapid interventions.

I am also challenged in this work. I experience "imposter syndrome" most when talking to an elected official, their staff or even our own colleagues in the Office(s) of Government Relations. My imposter syndrome can be traced directly back to the lack of structured background and education I received in medical training – a void that persists today. For me personally, much of this feeling of imposter syndrome can be traced to the fact that most of us in healthcare have little structured background or education when it comes to the brass tacks of what it really means to advocate for our patients.

In this week's issue we purposefully compiled perspectives from a broad array of those in our Medical College of Wisconsin family. Dr. Prasad, a Pediatric Emergency Medicine Fellow, reflects on her experience as an inaugural Vot-ER Civic Health Fellow and lessons in community engagement and advocacy. Laura Grogan, a medical student whose passion for reproductive justice has expanded to challenging herself to advocate with a lens of bipartisanship. Dr. Domeyer-Klenske, an Obstetrician and Gynecologist, reminisces about the importance of planning ahead and helping others do the same before elections season. Alexa Wild, Neurosurgery Clinical Research Coordinator and elections official, reminds us of the importance (and thrill) of helping others vote. Benjamin O'Brien, a PhD candidate in the Department of Cell Biology, Neurobiology and Anatomy, also an election official, tells us of his path from cynicism to voter advocacy. Dr. Thomas, a surgery resident, shares her fellowship story as the inaugural American College of Surgeons Firearm Injury Prevention Scholar.

Make no mistake, every contributor to this issue (including the talented medical student artist Natalie Honan) has made themselves vulnerable and subject to criticism for participating in civic engagement. Read that sentence again, and if that does not sit right with you, I encourage you to reflect on your comfort in speaking outwardly about how advocacy and voting impacts our personal and professional roles and lives. We must push ourselves to champion our democracy as it was intended to function, particularly as our voices in healthcare are some of the most critical to be heard. Don't let fear of failure or imposter syndrome hold you back.

As for me, I will keep plodding along, for the betterment of the lives of others is a hill on which I will fight to the end. This battle for me started well before becoming a Trauma Surgeon. Even as a white middle class individual, I grew up in close personal proximity to the effects of health inequity, illiteracy and gun violence. This proximity contributed to my growing understanding of the reality and effects of classism and racism. My father died a miserable death from renal failure on dialysis because he was just another number, just another patient, and I did not yet have the education and skills to advocate for him. Other members of my family have had their food spit-on and have been threatened with gun violence at school without repercussion to the offending individuals because I did not yet have the resources or wherewithal to protect them. Now as a professional, I have removed clothes and backpacks from children shot to death. *And I have failed* to save both kids and adults brought to me with gunshot wounds for which I have abjectly over the years blamed myself for being, well, not perfect enough. And THAT is the crux. It should not and must not be on us as those in healthcare (whatever our role) to treat and save the world from its woes one single human at a time because of political differences (indifference?).

My public health heart breaks too when I see public health officials chastised and threatened with violence or death as they simply work to help as many people as possible live healthy lives by way of seatbelts to safe water and everything in between. Their role and importance in society was made blatantly clear 150 years ago (reference John Snow and the birth of public health), yet still our society and elected officials have not heeded the lessons of history. Therefore, untold numbers needlessly suffer and die because of a broken system. For some it may be hard to accept or even understand, but the unnecessary suffering and death are the responsibility of us all, and in the very least we should vote and better yet empower those suffering the most to do the same.

Despite all this darkness, I remain hopeful. We dedicate time outside of our demanding schedules to visibly support voting agendas that will benefit our patients and our neighbors or contribute to legislation that will mandate better health for those whom we serve and care about. The passion of my colleagues around me inspires me, as well as the positivity and hope of my patients even in times of great loss. One such colleague, Dr. Meghan Shultz, wrote a powerful piece previously shared in the *Transformational Times*. If you have not yet read it, go now. I would only add that as heart-wrenching as it is to hear the wail of a mother who has lost a child, it is similarly heart-wrenching to witness the deafening silence of a father who just realized he failed to protect his family and can never, ever make things right. I encourage you to read and reflect, contemplate, talk to those around you (or the contributors to this edition), and bring your own passion and hope to advocacy, voting, and if possible legislative solutions a happier and healthier society.

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