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Physician Advocacy: Defining and Implementing Into Practice

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Physician Advocacy: Defining and Implementing Into Practice
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BACKGROUND
The commitment to advocacy for practicing physicians is a core principle of medical ethics. As outlined by the American Medical Association, “A physician shall recognize a responsibility to participate in activities contributing to the improvement of the community and betterment of public health.” However, the role of being a physician advocate is ill defined in both definition and scope. Advocacy is a widely used term that can include advocating for the individual patient, for the healthcare system, for physicians, for social change and for political policies. Advocacy is a core component of the perceived social and professional obligations of physicians, yet many feel their training and practice environment do not support increased engagement in advocacy. Perceived barriers include modernization of the health system, increased demands for physicians, and changes in reimbursement.

Our study aims to explore the role advocacy plays in a physician’s career and investigate the driving factors and perceived barriers contributing to a physician’s decision to engage in advocacy work.

METHODS
1. We identified physicians working on health advocacy in KS and MO via snowball sampling.
2. Invitations were emailed to participate in-person or phone interview.
3. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using list of structured, pre-determined questions.
4. Each interview was independently reviewed and coded by two researchers. A third researcher mediated conflicting findings.
5. Five coders analyzed and consolidated emerging themes.

RESULTS
Figure 1. Interview Selection Methods

Figure 3 and 4: Interviewee Demographics

Interview Questions & Corresponding Themes
What does physician advocacy mean to you?
1. Changing policies (8), Going beyond clinical duties (8)
2. Working for your patient’s healthcare one-on-one (7)
3. Helping those less fortunate because we have a stronger voice (3)
4. Avoid burnout (2)
5. Expectation of the profession (1)

How is advocacy incorporated into your practice?
1. Involvement in politics/policy work (9)
2. Day-to-day helping patients by going beyond the clinical visit (6)
3. Leadership organizations (4)
4. Training others (2)

What inspired you to engage in advocacy work?
1. Passion for patients & specialty (6)
2. Experiences with disparities (4)
3. Involvement in a professional society (2)
4. Personal responsibility, Public education (1), Mentorship (1)

Tell me about any formal or informal advocacy training that you have had.
1. No formal training (8)
2. Through a large medical organization (5)
3. Political Training (3)
4. Learning from peers or mentors (2), Formal residency training (2)

What suggestions do you have for physicians wanting to get involved in advocacy work?
1. Work with and learn from mentors (10)
2. Just do it! (7)
3. Find a passion (5)
4. Start early (3)

DISCUSSION & LIMITATIONS
A strength of this study was that we were able to conduct open-ended interviews with physicians from a variety of backgrounds and experience levels. A major limitation was that interviewees were selected because they were known to be involved in advocacy work, resulting in a biased sample and may only be representative of those who are skewed toward a positive view of advocacy. Future studies should explore the beliefs and experiences of physicians who are not involved in advocacy work.

We determined physicians need more training in advocacy, need help networking around specific advocacy work, and need systems in place which remove time barriers.

References: