

2014 AAO Advocacy Ambassador Program by Michael Stock, MD

What is advocacy? And why should you care? As most first-year ophthalmology residents, I spend most of my day in clinic seeing patients – diagnosing, educating, and treating. What time I have outside of clinic is spent reading or practicing surgery. Ultimately, these activities aim at the heart of what it is to be an ophthalmologist – caring for patients and continually improving upon our knowledge and skills to provide better care for the next patient. And I was content with this. After my experience with the Advocacy Ambassador program, I learned that it is not enough.

The Advocacy Ambassador program is a part of the American Academy of Ophthalmology's Congressional Advocacy Day and Mid-Year Forum. This meeting takes place annually in Washington, D.C. with the purpose of informing members of current bills, policies, and developments which have an impact on the practice of Ophthalmology. Congressional Advocacy Day brought us up-to-date on the latest bills being debated by the legislature and their potential effects on our profession. Armed with that knowledge and a mentor, we met with congressmen and their staffers to discuss these issues and explain how their passage would influence our practice and our patients. Afterwards, we took part in the Mid-Year Forum. The Forum was composed of a number of talks from authorities in the fields of health policy, insurance, and medical technology. These talks educated us on a variety of topics ranging from changes in the reimbursement strategies to security and storage with electronic health records.

These events taught me a myriad of things but I left with 2 main convictions. First, while many of us who go into medicine enjoy exploring the complexities of biology, we abhor those man-made complexities which touch the peripheral aspects of our profession. Because of this, many (including myself) thought, "Let someone else handle it." This meeting demonstrated that there is no one else. If we do not engage in these discussions, others will move the conversation in ways that can negatively affect our practice and the care of our patients. It is imperative that we are active in these "peripheral" issues. If not, we may find new impositions which hinder our ability to take the best care of our patients and enjoy the process.

Secondly, while many of these topics are seemingly complex (and some assuredly are complex), all are approachable. I thought approaching the legislature required good connections or professional lobbyists. After our trip to Capitol Hill, I appreciated just how easy and open it is to speak with congressmen and their staffers. More surprising to me was how receptive they were to our viewpoint as ophthalmologists. After the Mid-Year forum talks, I felt that I had been given a good background on a range of topics affecting everyday practice. With regards to EHR and medical devices such as OCTs, I learned that a manufacturer's compliance with current law is not a given. When selecting these products it is important to know if they do comply and are active in updating systems when the law changes. It is also important to maintain a dialogue with your manufacturer's representatives to push to have their systems fully integrate with these evolving healthcare requirements.

The AAO Advocacy Ambassador Program changed how I view my role as an ophthalmologist. I have since been in contact with the staffers of my congressmen to inquire about any further questions on bills we discussed. I have also joined my state society and hope to be a part of the conversation at both the state and national level. I strongly encourage you to consider your role in the profession. Providing the best care for our patients requires it.