Washington Consult

An Introduction to Advocacy

Oncologists are on the front lines of medicine in practices and hospitals across the nation every day. Meanwhile, in Washington, DC, there's a lot going on behind the scenes. Government actions and legislation directly affect the type and quality of care provided by practicing physicians, and the research that supports their treatment choices.

Joseph DiBenedetto, MD (Oncology and Hematology Associates, Providence, Rhode Island), says, "Before making a decision about drugs or procedures, I have to ask myself, 'Is this approved by the government? Is it covered? How many phone calls will I have to make to *get* this paid for?' You have to know what's going on in the world around you."

The best way to understand the legislative process and its effects on cancer care is to become a part of that process. "For this profession, in order to take its next step, each and every one of us . . . is going to have to do more than just see patients anymore," says DiBenedetto. "We need to participate."

That's where advocacy comes in. Advocacy means educating decision makers with the intent of influencing the final decisions that so strongly direct medical care in the United States. Whether it's writing a letter to a representative or paying a personal visit to Capitol Hill, oncologists' efforts to convey their community cancer care needs to policy makers can make a big difference on a national level.

Edward Balaban, DO (Sewickley Medical Oncology Hematology Group, University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania), says, "Some doctors think we're not qualified [to advocate] because all we do is take care of patients. We think advocacy groups and lobbyist groups have all the talking points." According to Balaban, though, that's just not the case. "Once you go down there and talk to the senators and congressmen," he says, "you see that they have a genuine interest in what's happening at home. They can connect with you in a way they can't connect with others on local issues, what's happening in your state. That connection on a local level can help create support on a national level."

DiBenedetto agrees. "When a professional shows up, their ears begin to perk up. You *do* command their attention. You walk away thinking you may have done something," he says. "It's really not until the next time you visit that you realize that you've left your mark—when you walk into the room and they remember you."

ASCO Advocacy Assistance

ASCO.org's Legislative & Regulatory section provides a variety of tools and information to help oncologists in their advocacy efforts:

- Detailed information on policy issues
- Congressional action alerts
- Contact information for elected officials
- Primer on the legislative process, including how a bill becomes a law
- Rosters of health care–related Congressional committees
- Tips for communicating with your representative, both in writing and in person

Visit www.asco.org/legandreg or contact ASCO's Office of Cancer Policy & Clinical Affairs at 703-229-1050 or grassroots@asco.org.

But how does one become an advocate? The first step is knowing who the major players are and understanding how they work individually and collectively. For instance, committee and subcommittee action is an integral part of the legislative process. Once legislation is introduced, it must pass through a committee of jurisdiction, and it is in this forum that the legislation gets its most thorough public vetting through public hearings. There are four main committees in Congress that have jurisdiction over issues affecting oncologists:

- The Senate Finance Committee and its Subcommittee on Health Care cover a variety of health-related areas, including issues of entitlement programs, Medicare and Medicaid.
- The Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee deals with everything from education and training to labor and aging to public health and welfare. Issues currently before the committee include drug safety and the Food and Drug Administration.
- The House Energy & Commerce Committee and its Subcommittee on Health have jurisdiction over public health matters including Medicare, Medicaid, and the National Cancer Institute.
- The House Ways & Means Committee and its Subcommittee on Health cover programs that provide payments (from any source) for health care, health delivery systems, or health research, specifically Medicare.

It is important to interact with these committees through your most accessible route—your member of Congress and his or her staff. (To locate your local representatives, visit ASCO.org’s Legislative & Regulatory section, which contains contact information for elected officials in its Grassroots Action Center.) Once you establish contact with your member’s office and staff and begin developing a relationship, you have the opportunity to educate that member and impact his or her activities on the committee.

Responsible advocacy is the most effective way to influence your legislator’s vote on key legislation. Make your views known by providing practical, evidence-based information, and communicate professionally, whether on an individual basis or through ASCO’s channels. DiBenedetto says, “It’s important to point out the tremendous support that ASCO gives you—everything from finding a place to go to answering any questions that come up.”

ASCO.org also contains a wealth of information. It provides state and national contact information for members of Congress, but it also provides background information on health care–related federal agencies, an overview of the legislative process, tips for conducting site visits with elected officials, and ideas for local advocacy activities to help oncologists fit this critical activity into their already-full schedules.

“For practicing physicians to go and advocate, one of the big concerns is that we don’t have time to go to Washington,” says DiBenedetto. “We can’t take time out of our busy patient schedules, and we figure that with all the lobbyists and the advocacy groups, it won’t make a difference anyway. That’s a mistake. Oncologists can provide a unique and important perspective about our own issues.”

DiBenedetto and Balaban both observe that the connection between oncologists and their representatives is what makes a lasting impression. Later articles in this *Journal of Oncology Practice* series on advocacy will address various ways for physicians to advocate for themselves and for their patients. The first step, and the most important, is establishing that connection with the elected officials whose votes control the creation and implementation of health care legislation.

Balaban says, “There is a moment of ‘What am I doing there?’—a moment of trepidation—because advocacy is so far removed from what we do every day. But doctors are not out of their element. It’s about dealing with personalities, and that’s what we do all day. [Advocacy] is a real moment to energize yourself.”

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Assess and Improve Care in Your Medical Oncology Practice

The goal of ASCO’s **Quality Oncology Practice Initiative (QOPI)** is to promote excellence in cancer care by helping medical oncologists create a culture of self-examination and improvement.

QOPI practices benefit from knowledge of practice strengths and weaknesses, and access to tools and strategies to improve care. By participating in QOPI, physicians receive practice-specific data, aggregate data from their peers for comparison, and access to resources for implementing best practices. All practice-specific data are released only to that practice and are kept strictly confidential.

For info on how to join this oncologist-led initiative for assessing and improving care in medical oncology practice, visit www.ASCO.org/QOPI.