Tom Pollard, father of life science policy advocacy

Kevin Wilson¹

Received: 24 July 2018 / Accepted: 23 November 2018 / Published online: 3 December 2018

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Abstract

Tom Pollard has played an instrumental role in the creation of the life science policy and advocacy programs familiar to life scientists today. This article reviews the creation of that program and the role Tom played. In addition, it briefly discusses advocacy activities now available to life scientists and why they should participate in these activities.

Keywords Life science policy advocacy · Policy activities · Science advocacy

Since the mid-1980s, science policy advocacy has been a critical part of the work done by professional life science societies. Depending on the field of science, this advocacy can address policy activities at the local, state, or federal government. Almost all policy advocacy programs address activities taking place at the legislative or executive branches of the federal government.

The type of involvement can sometimes depend on the size of the society and the interest of its members and leadership. The methods, degrees, and type of policy advocacy involvement are as varied as the number of organizations but it is unusual for groups not to be involved in some way. Some groups limit their advocacy activities to grassroots advocacy in which they alert members about something taking place at a government agency and urge them to take a specific action. These actions can range from writing letters, making phone calls, and/or making personal visits. As social media grows in importance, grassroots advocacy is also moving to these platforms as well.

Professional societies also often employ science policy staff members who follow local, state, and federal policy actions and make recommendations for policy actions by the society that often includes grassroots advocacy as part of larger involvement in shaping policy. Having professional policy staff as part of a professional society allows the organization to

focus on policy activities that match the scientific focus of the organization.

Some groups often decide to join together to form coalitions for specific science policy activities. This allows the individual groups to maximize a small investment of time and expense by joining with likeminded groups to achieve a mutual goal. In many cases, individual societies would have to engage in the policy matter anyway so joining together with other groups allows each to benefit from the unique expertise that other groups bring to the table.

Regardless of how professional societies choose to become engaged in policy advocacy, the societies and their members who benefit from the policy work done by these groups all have one thing in common; they all have Tom Pollard to thank for leading the development of life science policy advocacy.

The history of life science policy in the USA is not widely written about. Luckily, in 2012, Pollard wrote a perspective piece for the *American Society for Cell Biology's* (ASCB) journal, *Molecular Biology of the Cell* (MBoC). In the piece, “Political advocacy by the American Society for Cell Biology and its partners” (Volume 23, November 1, 2012), Tom gives an informative history of the creation of life science policy advocacy.

In his MBoC piece, Pollard points out that the 1970s and 1980s were not a time of policy involvement for the life science community. According to Pollard, the professional societies were not unaware of the science-related policy issues. The issues, particularly concerns about adequate federal funding of science, were debated and discussed but not shared with those who could make the changes. This lack of concern is certainly understandable. For most of the late 1970s, there

✉ Kevin Wilson
kwilson@ascb.org

¹ American Society for Cell Biology, Bethesda, MD, USA

was little for the life science community to worry about from the federal government. From 1971 to 1979, the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) saw double-digit budget increases each year.

The dawn of the 1980s brought big changes to politics in the USA which would bring new tension to the relationship between the science community and government. These changes in political dialog would ultimately make it necessary for science to raise its voice in a way that it had not done in the past.

The 1980 campaign for President of the USA and the ultimate election of Ronald Reagan brought a change in politics in the USA. The conservative wing of the Republican Party grew in power during the campaign. In particular, the political group the Moral Majority was formed to insert a conservative religious agenda into American politics. The Moral Majority and its founder, Reverend Jerry Falwell, played a significant role in the 1980 election.

Three issues in particular, the evolution vs. creationism debate, the causes and potential solutions to acid rain, and, most importantly, Reagan's plan to develop and deploy the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), started to drive a wedge between science and government. While the evolution vs. creationism debate created a disagreement between science and religion, SDI, commonly referred to as Star Wars, probably drew the biggest wedge.

SDI was a proposed missile defense system with the goal of providing protection for the USA from intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles using space-based weapons. In the book, *The Republican War on Science*, Chris Mooney describes the belief within the scientific community that the proposal as outlined by President Reagan would never work. Instead of working with the scientific community to improve its proposal or to explain their plan in greater detail, the Reagan Administration pushed forward, insisting that the proposal would work. As Mooney says, "In response to these reports [by scientific organizations] the administration and its conservative supporters engaged in a pitched battle against the scientific consensus, even attempting actual scientific suppression." (p. 45).

It is against this political backdrop that Pollard led the creation, in a short period of time, of the policy and advocacy infrastructure familiar to our community today.

For many years, the scientific community had depended on university and medical school organizations to represent the interests of scientists who worked at the institutions. The governing council of the ASCB began discussions in early 1988 about hiring its own policy director to lead a more aggressive in-house policy operation that focused on the interests of cell biology. Since the Council was concerned about the financial implications of such a hire, Pollard, then president of the ASCB, proposed that they conduct an experiment and hire the policy director for only 1 year (p. 4171). As the

third policy director for the ASCB, I am pleased that the experiment appears to be successful.

The job of the new policy director was to focus on the policy issues in Congress and in the Executive branch that were of concern to the cell biology community. Pollard also believed it was important to develop a complementary advocacy program to make sure that the voices of the scientific community were heard. This was becoming increasingly important since the views of universities and research institutions were, at that time, not always in line with the needs of the scientific community.

In 1990, the ASCB joined together with the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (ASBMB) to hire a professional lobbyist to represent the life science community on Capitol Hill. In order to oversee the activities of the lobbyist, a coalition was formed. The coalition was initially called the Joint Steering Committee for Public Policy (JSCPP), because the original mission of the coalition was only to steer the work of the lobbyist. In 2008, the coalition would change its name to the Coalition for the Life Sciences (CLS). This change was welcome news to JSCPP advocates. Too often, when advocates, arriving at Congressional offices for meetings, announced themselves as representing the Joint Steering Committee for Public Policy, Congressional staff would, looking confused, ask "About ... " or "For" It was time for a change.

Over time, the JSCPP's activities had expanded beyond oversight of its lobbyist to include a wide range of grassroots activities. These activities included advocacy alerts to grassroots members and the organization of Capitol Hill Days that brought scientists from around the nation for a day of meetings with Congress. As the size of the coalition grew, the JSCPP was able to hire full-time, professional staff to organize those activities.

Some of the early grassroots efforts included advocacy toolkits for scientists living in Illinois, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. These state-specific toolkits included biographical information on the state's Congressional delegation, information on the federal budget process, the positions of delegation members on legislative actions of interest to the life science community, tips for communicating with Congress and with the media, and sample Letters to Editor of local newspapers. As a sign of the times, the contact information for members of the Pennsylvania Congressional delegation included phone numbers, fax numbers, and "E-mail (where available)."

A more substantial local effort took place on the West Coast of the USA. It was centered in California and expanded to include Oregon and Washington with a full-time JSCPP employee, Michele Grifka, based at the University of California, San Diego. Her position was supported by research institutions in California and later in Washington and Oregon. Having Grifka on the ground helped the JSCPP build better

advocacy connections with local institutions and, most importantly, local researchers. Her experience working for Representative Nancy Pelosi also helped build critical connections with members of the Congressional delegations from the three states. Pollard was actively involved in the operation of the west coast initiative, including encouraging local research institutions to provide financial support.

The JSCPP was also one of the first organizations to establish a regular series of briefings for members of Congress and their staff. The JSCPP works with a bipartisan group of members of Congress to run the operations of the Congressional Biomedical Research Caucus (CBRC). The mission of the CBRC is to bring top notch scientists to Capitol Hill to brief Congress about the status of important biomedical research supported with federal funds. The first briefing took place on October 3, 1990. The topic was “Why is the U.S. Number One in Biomedical Research? How Do We Maintain of Leadership?” The speakers that day were Leon Rosenberg from Yale University, Harold Varmus, at the University of California, San Francisco, and Cori Bargmann, with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Starting the next year, the goal of the CBRC has been to have at least one briefing each month that Congress was in session.

Attendees at these briefings include college students serving internships in Congressional offices who are assigned to attend the briefing and report back to their office, legislative staff from Congressional offices whose legislative portfolios include the briefing topic, and members of Congress interested in the science or who are strong supporters of NIH funding. Researchers from the Library of Congress’ Congressional Research Service (CRS), which serves as the research arm for Congress, attend the briefings to stay on top of cutting edge science.

1991 was the first full series of briefings and Pollard, along with Malcolm Martin from the NIH, gave the first briefing which addressed the question, “Why Is There no Vaccine for the AIDS Virus?” Since 1990, the JSCPP has brought over 250 talks on important life science issues to the halls of Congress.

I joined the ASCB as its third Director of Public Policy in May 2001. Before coming to the ASCB, I had worked on Capitol Hill for over 15 years. From 1982 until 1997, I worked for US Senator Claiborne Pell (D-RI). After working in his office as a college intern, I started working my way up the ladder in his Washington, DC, staff, ultimately serving as the Legislative Assistant responsible for labor, job training, and employment issues. I was also responsible for policy issues connected with converting the USA to the metric system. The Senator strongly believed that the USA would realize significant economic benefits if it were to convert so this was an important issue to him. Fortunately for me, no one else of the staff wanted to handle the issue so they gave it to me.

After the Senator retired from the Senate in 1997, I went to work for the newly elected US Representative Robert Weygand (D-RI) as his Legislative Director, supervising the entire legislative staff and overseeing the whole legislative portfolio. In early 1999, Weygand announced that he would run for one of Rhode Island’s two US Senate seats. He was not elected and everyone who worked for him was out of job in early 2001. In four short years, we had been through three elections and the drama associated with a vote by the US House of Representatives to impeach President Clinton.

In my entire career on Capitol Hill, I never met a life scientist so I had lots to learn. Tom was one of the first ASCB members I met. California members of the JSCPP were in town for meetings on Capitol Hill and one of the first Congressional office meetings I had to lead was with Tom and some students in a meeting with Rep. Randy “Duke” Cunningham (R-CA). The students were ecstatic to be able to spend time with Tom and I was still learning how to be an advocate.

Cunningham, a conservative Republican, one of the most highly decorated US Navy pilots during the Vietnam War, represented the San Diego area of California. When he entered the House of Representatives, he supported privatizing the NIH. Thanks to the long hard work of ASCB and JSCPP grassroots advocacy, he had changed his mind and was a big supporter of the NIH by the time we met with his office. In the following 4 years, ongoing advocacy efforts would convince him to support federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. Unfortunately, he was forced to resign from the House of Representatives in the fall of 2005 after pleading guilty to accepting millions of dollars in bribes. He would later plead guilty to federal charges of tax evasion and conspiracy to commit bribery, mail fraud, and wire fraud. He was sentenced to 8 years and 4 months in prison.

Even though Tom was a member of the ASCB Public Policy Committee, the first time I was able to work closely with him was in 2005 when the JSCPP was conducting a search for a new staff member. Longtime, JSCPP staffer Matt Zonerich was leaving the JSCPP and we needed a new staff person with the skills necessary to match a growing coalition. The ASCB was and remains the administrative partner of the coalition and the day to day work of conducting the search was put on my desk. Luckily for me, Tom volunteered to lead the search. We worked together to recommend two highly qualified candidates to the JSCPP board which ultimately hired Lynn Marquis, who leads very ably the CLS today.

In early 2001, the ASCB and patient and other disease advocacy groups recognized that a big policy fight was at hand over federal support of research using human embryonic stem cells. In an effort to maximize skill and workload, the ASCB and a number of patient advocacy and university

groups had formed a coalition. The coalition, the Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research (CAMR), became the leading voice in support of federal support for human embryonic stem cell research and the ASCB and its scientists were in charge of providing the scientific advice. Stem cells remained a major policy issue for most of President George W. Bush's two terms in office. However, as the second Bush term was drawing to a close in 2007, it was clear that the stem cell supporters were not going to get the bill we felt was needed to allow the research to move forward.

In 2007, Tom became chair of the ASCB's Public Policy Committee. The policy issues facing the NIH and the NIH community needed Tom's expertise. After a 5-year plan to double the NIH budget that ended in 2003, the NIH community had to fight for every dollar of funding. Too often, when advocates would go to Congress asking for additional increases, they were met with what became known as "NIH Fatigue." Congressional staff would ask, "Didn't we just double the NIH budget?" It was going to take a combination of policy work and grassroots advocates backing up the policy work to overcome this funding malaise.

Tom still plays a vital role for the CLS. When the CLS member organization policy directors talk too long about this bill or that level of funding, Tom always brings us back to the important question, "What can our advocates do?"

At the ASCB, he continues to be a critical member of the Public Policy Committee. He partnered with students to help them write a paper on advocacy for MBoC and most recently has played a critical role in developing an ASCB position on a proposed NIH policy to reverse the current trend of declining funding for early- and mid-career investigators. Tom's leadership and voice were instrumental in crafting our position on an important issue that elicits strong opinions on all sides.

Thanks in no small part to Tom's efforts, the life science community has at its disposal a vibrant, easy to use, and powerful science policy and advocacy system. That system cannot function without your participation, however.

The ASCB and other professional life science societies have professional policy staff who work on behalf of their scientists. But they cannot do the work alone. They need to hear from you when you face policy-related problems. They need your help in understanding the potential impact of proposed government actions.

You also play an important role in backing up official positions taken by your society. When it comes to educating government officials, both quality and quantity are called for. One nicely worded, well-reasoned policy statement is helpful, but is even better if it is backed up by letters and phone calls from constituents.

Never underestimate the importance of just introducing yourself to an elected official or fellow citizen and sharing with them your passion for research and the potential your field of research could have for medicine.

Believe it or not, science advocacy takes as much time as you have to give. If you only have a few minutes, make a phone call to an elected official about an issue of concern to you. If they have done something you agree with, call and thank them.

If you find a spare hour, write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper or write an Op/Ed expressing your opinion. Well-reasoned letters and newspaper opinion pieces are important ways to reach your fellow citizens and are critical to shaping public opinion.

Dedicating a day to advocacy is important too. Most people have never been in a research lab. Their image of what a science lab looks like may be closer to the Hollywood version of a science lab than what a lab is actually like. Invite government leaders or local citizens to tour your lab to see your research and how it is actually done. Replacing the Hollywood image in their mind with reality can be an important step in building support for and interest in science.

Reach out to local civic organizations like the Lion's Club or the Rotary Club. Offer to come to speak to one of their meetings, telling them about the important medical research being done in their community. Do not be surprised if you are the first scientist they have ever heard from.

As advocates, it is most important that you take the time to be informed advocates. Take a little time to keep up with the news relative to the issues of interest to you. Well-informed advocates make better advocates and are more respected than those not familiar with the facts.

If you only take part in one advocacy activity each year, the single most important advocacy activity you can do is to vote in local, state, and federal elections. It does not matter who you vote for as long as you vote. American citizens have the unique role as supervisors of their government. It is important that we exercise those responsibilities. Voter registration and other information is available on-line in most states. A number of states also offer early voting opportunities to allow you to vote at a more convenient time.

And of course, the next time you see him, make sure to say, "Thanks Tom."

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest Kevin Wilson declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by the author.

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