

How physicians can “flex their advocacy muscles”

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Physicians are in a “very unique position” to be effective advocates for change in Canadian health care, Dr. Monika Dutt said during a session on physician advocacy at the annual general council of the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) in Quebec City. Doctors know what is happening on the front lines of medicine. They know how the health care system works. They know about the lives of their patients and can empower those patients to ensure their voices are heard.

“What a doctor says and does can be very powerful,” said Dutt, a family physician in Nova Scotia and a past chair of Canadian Doctors for Medicare.

There are many pressing issues in health care in Canada, noted Dutt. Some physicians are concerned about medical professionalism. Some are worried about physician burnout. Others may want to lend their support to causes such as pharmacare or increasing access to health care for marginalized populations.

“Advocacy can take many forms,” said Dutt.

Understanding how government works is an important step for doctors who want to affect health policy. In Canada, health care services are provided by provincial governments. There is, however, overlap with federal politics. If physicians want to meet with a politician to discuss a particular health issue, they should first determine which level of government they should engage.



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If physicians are advocating for a cause that will require federal funding, they should have at least a rudimentary understanding of the budgetary cycle. In particular, they should know when to submit proposals for funding to pre-budget consultations. The deadline for written submissions to [pre-budget consultations for the 2018 budget](#) was Aug. 4, and meetings will be held in September.

An effective strategy for advocacy will require more, however, than just keeping track of funding deadlines. Some sugges-

tions provided at the CMA session by people with many years of experience working in government include defining your goal, identifying decision-makers, having two or three clear messages and using plain language in written submissions. It was also noted that politicians are aware of how much physicians are respected in their communities and will make time to meet with them.

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