

The Joint Surgical Advocacy Conference – A Young Surgeon Discovers Washington
Randall R. De Martino, MD

“We in America do not have government by the majority. We have government by the majority who participate”

Thomas Jefferson

As physicians, and particularly as surgeons, we are driven by data. With this perspective, it is hard to understand why the SGR remains. Why does Congress continue with a failing reimbursement system and maintain unrealistic reimbursement projections? How can we pass sub-optimal health care reform with no malpractice reform measures? One of the first things I learned in Washington was that this town works *differently*. Data may drive clinical practice, but everything in Washington is driven by policy, politics, and procedure. This system is not designed to pass a large amount of legislation, even if it is good. In fact, less than 3% of all bills introduced annually will ever become law.

Once I was able to get past the design of the system our forefathers put into place, I was able to understand that the key to success in Washington is *to be part of the system*. To make change happen, you need to be an active participant. If you are not there speaking your mind, someone else is. As I sat side by side with dozens of orthopedic, general, and vascular surgeons who took time from their practice, I realized how important advocacy is. These surgeons realize that the value of a day spent with their legislators is greater than a day of office revenue. The only way to ensure new legislation protects your ability to practice is be active and be heard.

So the more obvious question is, “What can I do?” Sometimes facing a Goliath like Washington seems futile. Let me assure you it is not. Your representatives are desperate to hear your concerns. They share the same goal of providing and caring for our neighbors. Yet, they often must juggle a myriad of policy issues and cannot be an expert on all current health care issues. They need quality information to help guide their policy decisions. This is the information we are trained to understand and we represent the perfect source of information for them.

Here are some helpful hints. First, be active and contribute. If you cannot get to Washington, visit your representative’s local office. Constituents can usually get a longer visit with their representative when they are in their home district. If you can’t make it to their offices, then call the office, send a letter, or write an email. Let them know the issues. More importantly, let them know how the current legislation will affect your patient (who coincidentally is their constituent). *Make it personal*. Use a vignette of a recent patient to illustrate your point. This will go a long way. Remember, it’s not always about the data, but also about the politics. If you cannot do any of the above, then contribute to your specialty’s Political Action Committee. Remember that the Society for Vascular Surgery PAC is the *only* PAC to represent vascular surgeons and their interests. PACs are a great way to amass funds for advocacy efforts and to support Congressional leaders whose ideals align with your own.

Remember, it’s all about policy, politics and procedure in Washington. All three are needed to get good legislation through Capital Hill. Congressional

Representatives base their policies and politics on what their constituents tell them. We need to be the majority that participate. So, let them know the facts and how your patients will be affected by upcoming legislation. As surgeons, we must make a strong presence to ensure we can adequately care for those who need us the most, our patients.