

Why Hill Day Matters

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Several years ago, I attended my first SGIM Hill Day at the urging of my division director. At the time, I was finishing up a general internal medicine fellowship. While I was eager to please, I knew almost nothing about health policy. At SGIM's dinner the evening before that first Hill Day, I listened to members of SGIM's executive health policy committee rattle off an alphabet soup of acronyms: Title VII, SGR, RUC. As they eloquently spoke about these issues, I started doubting my ability to maintain an informed discussion with the legislators I would visit and was certain I would have no influence.

The following morning, during our briefing from CRD, which represents SGIM's interests in government affairs, I remember being very nervous until one of CRD's members reminded us that, as practicing physicians, we had expertise to share with these legislators. My colleague and I then set off to Capitol Hill to our scheduled meetings at the offices of both of our state's senators and our congressman. At these offices, we saw many other advocacy group representatives, and I started to understand the "game" of advocacy. Although occasionally an SGIM member meets with his/her actual representative, we met with legislative assistants who were young college graduates. As we spoke about issues relevant to general internal medicine and left behind additional information, I realized that CRD was absolutely right. As general internists, we were able to convey meaningful stories about the importance of supporting legislation that promotes general internal medi-

cine. We told stories about our patients and their struggles with health insurance. To emphasize the need for equitable payment reform, I discussed the reasons why I chose a career in general internal medicine when many of my residency classmates chose to pursue subspecialties. We discussed Title VII and the importance of continued funding for training of general internists. These personal stories and discussions seemed to resonate with the legislative assistants. By the end of the day, I felt that, even if nothing else ever came from our discussions and leave-behind materials, our stories were heard and would hopefully be remembered.

I felt much more confident the following year at my second SGIM Hill Day, and I better understood SGIM's health policy agenda. That year, Congress passed a continuing resolution that was impacting me personally; funding for a grant I had submitted was dependent on a budget being approved by Congress. During Hill Day, I was able to speak personally about the importance of supporting health services research and gave examples of how research findings could directly benefit patients.

Although it is very difficult to measure the impact of SGIM's Hill Day, in the past few years there have been several anecdotal successes. One SGIM member ended up inviting her congressman to her house for dinner to continue a discussion they had started during Hill Day about health disparities. Another SGIM member's briefing to his congressman eventually led to the introduction of legislation to require an

annual review of misvalued E&M codes. Many veteran SGIM Hill Day attendees have developed relationships with their representatives and maintain a dialogue throughout the year about health policy issues.

It's been especially interesting to have attended Hill Days before, during, and after the passing of the Affordable Care Act. People have strong feelings about health care reform and are eager to express their beliefs about its strengths and limitations. As the implementation of the Affordable Care Act continues, it seems more important than ever to attend Hill Day to ensure that the policies included in the legislation that support general internal medicine and our patients are not overshadowed by rhetoric and controversy.

I don't know how much impact I have personally had during Hill Day. I know that at each visit, I'm just one of many meetings each legislative assistant holds each day. I'm also not naïve enough to believe that everything I say is passed on from the legislative assistants to the legislators. Nevertheless, I don't think that it would be fair for me to criticize reimbursement inequity, the lack of universal coverage, inadequate Title VII funding, or limited research funding if I did not do everything possible to advocate for these issues. I know that by attending Hill Day, I am doing my absolute best to ensure that SGIM's collective voice—representing general internists, our patients, and our students—is heard loud and clear on Capitol Hill.

SGIM's Hill Day will be held March 12, 2014.