



PHARMACY ADVOCACY: Protect the Patient, Protect the Profession, Get Involved!

By ALMON PERRY

MPA Legislative Intern

Two friends are watching television, only to have their favorite program interrupted by a political speech. The first friend exclaims, "I can't believe this person got elected!" The second friend asks, "Well, who did you vote for then?" The first friend cowers slightly because s/he knows what is going to happen after s/he gives the answer, "Well actually... I ... I didn't vote." Then the second friend, without missing a beat, recites the line that we have all heard so many times, "If you didn't vote, you have no right to complain!"

We have all overheard and probably had this conversation at some point in our lives. However, what most of us do not realize is that the second friend is asking the wrong question. Even though voting is a crucial element to the democratic process, simply exercising that right does not entitle anyone with the right to complain when the other candidate is elected. The appropriate response to a friend that is complaining about candidates or policies should be, "Well, if you don't like

it, do something about it!" A single official being elected at any level of government can impact the direction that the government will take. However, all the personal agendas, political affiliations and egos that legislators might have crumble when prodded by an organized advocacy effort.

You may be thinking to yourself, "Well, I already belong to an association that advocates for my interests and profession ... I pay dues ... I'm doing my part." This is a good first step; however, that is all it is, one single step in the right direction. It is not enough. If you sincerely want to protect your patients, you must protect your profession. In order to protect your profession, you must advocate on the behalf of pharmacy. It is that simple.

The interesting aspect to pharmacy advocacy is that unlike those other important obligations we all have, advocacy does not require much time or effort. The benefits, protecting the patient and the profession, undoubtedly outweigh the opportunity costs. Once a pharmacist understands the importance of pharmacy advocacy and commits himself/herself to dedicating just a small

portion of time, they are then ready to implement two different genres of advocacy at his/her disposal. The first is "grassroots" and the second is "netroots." The two entities of advocacy do overlap slightly; however, there are certain advantages to each one. You do not have to engage in all the aspects of each genre, it is just about doing what you can. Once we explore both genres and the avenues that exist within them, it will become clear that there is a form of pharmacy advocacy for everyone.

Grassroots

Grassroots is a term with which many of us are familiar; however, the vast majority of us do not realize all the avenues that it encompasses. When we hear "grassroots," we may automatically picture a Benjamin Franklin-like figure dressed in a topcoat with tails and a large funny hat, standing on top of a soapbox, shouting for social change. This might have been true in the 18th century, but believe it or not, grassroots advocates in this century look nothing like Ben. Much like our taste in fashion, grassroots efforts have

evolved significantly over time. However, there is one requirement to implementing effective grassroots efforts that has not and will not change: the task of staying informed. This core element has remained at the heart of grassroots efforts because without knowing about the proposed legislation, no one is able to do anything about it. Luckily, with the emergence of netroots, staying informed and current on the issues that affect pharmacy has become quick and easy. Having said this, it might seem as though we should start with netroots; however, to hold to a principle of venerability, we will start with grassroots.

Spreading the Word

One of the most important and repeatedly overlooked forms of grassroots is discussing issues of concern with the community at large. The issues that pharmacy advocates are concerned about affect not only the profession but also the patients who are served. This means that pharmacists need to inform their patients, friends and family about their concerns. When pharmacists communicate their problems, they increase the community's awareness, which increases the effectiveness of their efforts. If the people in your community do not understand the importance of your cause, they cannot and will not defend it. Simply spreading the knowledge about the problems pharmacists face throughout your community is not enough though; the grassroots effort has to be waged on multiple fronts.

Contact Your Legislator

One of the easiest forms of grassroots attacks the source of the legislative process, contacting your legislator. Effective ways to implement this grassroots avenue include sending your legislators a handwritten letter or calling them on the phone (e-mails will be covered in netroots). Today, in the era of impersonal online communications, if a constituent takes the time to pen his/her legislator or make a phone call, it will undoubtedly have a significant impact. Assuredly we all can agree, writing a letter or making a phone call does not take that much time, especially when we consider the cost of indifference or inaction. "You know," the laggard pharmacist chimes in, "I would love to make a phone call ... but, I don't know the numbers ... and ... and ... I really don't like expensive phone bills." These excuses don't cut it. All you have to do is log on to MPA's Web site, go to the Legislation Action Center under the Advocacy tab and scroll down until you see the section that reads, "To find your U.S. Representative and State Legislators..." After you submit your address,

this page will provide you with your legislator's contact information, including a toll-free telephone number for each legislator. I would bet that the qualities of these avenues, being easily accessible, timely, free and incalculably beneficial would be enough for you to throw down the magazine and start writing a letter with one hand and calling with the other. But, just in case some of you are already doing this and want to do more or this avenue really isn't for you, we will continue.

One of the most vital aspects of a grassroots effort is building strong relationships with your legislators. This can be accomplished in several ways. One way is by scheduling an appointment with your legislator, or as they say in Lansing, a "meet and greet." If you decide that you would like to meet your legislator this way, make sure that you remember that legislators have extremely demanding schedules and there is a possibility that the meeting will be brief. On average, a "meet and greet" only lasts about 15-30 minutes; however, the bond that can be created has benefits that last much longer. The second way to meet your legislator is by discovering when and where his/her "coffee meeting" is scheduled. Almost all the legislators have a local venue in their district where they drink coffee and discuss the concerns of their constituents. To schedule a "meet and greet" or to find out when your legislators' hold their "coffee meetings", go to the MPA Web site, look up your legislators' office numbers and give them a call. If you hold any sort of reservations about meeting with your legislator, it is important to realize that pharmacists and legislators have a great deal in common. This might seem like a strange remark, but when we explore it, the connection becomes clear. You and your legislator live in or near the same community, and you both have a significant interest in ensuring that your community prospers. You and your legislators also have families that live, work and interact with one another in some manner. In addition, and more importantly, both pharmacists and legislators share the same patients; and in both occupations, the patients that they serve and protect are their primary concern. Keeping these similarities in mind, building a strong relationship with your legislator should come with ease.

Donating Time and Money

The old adage, "Many hands make light work," is an important mantra when it comes to pharmacy advocacy. It does not take a great deal of effort from any one person as long as all pharmacists pitch in. One of the

most effective ways to do your part is by volunteering your time to a candidate that you believe in. If you volunteer to knock on doors, or put up signs on one of your days off, a politician will be forever grateful; and grateful people make great listeners. It is also advantageous because it enables you to get to know the candidate and allows the candidate to get to know a pharmacist, building that relationship which we discussed above.

However, not all of us are going to be able to volunteer our time, when we are already being pulled in some many different directions. Therefore, we should take the second best course of action: making a donation to a candidate's campaign. If you are anything like me though, making a large donation to a campaign may not be possible. Especially during this current economic climate, you should be aware that even donating a relatively small amount does make an impact for any politician. Other options to consider instead of making a lone contribution would be to have a "donation potluck dinner" or a "donation party." Upon calling the invitees, inform them that there will be a recommended \$10-15 donation that will be given to a local candidate. Then when you take the proceeds into campaign members, tell them and the candidate that the donation is from "Pharmacists for ____." This is a fun and easy form of pharmacy advocacy that anyone can enjoy. However, the most important purpose of these "donation parties" is reaching the members of the pharmacy community who typically would not get involved in politics to become engaged without really noticing. Donating time or money to candidates and their campaigns is an extremely beneficial facet of pharmacy advocacy; however, the most important donation that a pharmacist can make is not to a campaign.

Pharmacy PAC: Pharmacists' Most Important Form of Grassroots and Best Line of Defense

Michigan pharmacists must finance Pharmacy PAC; it is just that simple. This may seem like a bold claim; however, the more an individual understands the Michigan Legislature, the more Pharmacy PAC's importance becomes obvious. When pharmacists donate to Pharmacy PAC, they are ensuring that the issues that affect pharmacy are going to be brought to the attention of every Michigan legislator. This resource for pharmacists is priceless, especially in the current economic climate here in Michigan. Everyone knows that when the government becomes financially hard-pressed, the first course of action is to find ways to generate revenue. This means



Bonus Online Continuing Education

Pharmacy Advocacy

Review this issue's cover story online and receive one hour of continuing education credit. Visit MichiganPharmacists.org/education/continuingEducation/online/ and find the "Pharmacy Advocacy" article.

Medical Marijuana

This exclusive online continuing education article covers the nuances of the medical marijuana act passed last fall in the general election and how a ballot initiative works. Visit MichiganPharmacists.org/education/continuingEducation/online/ and find the "Medical Marijuana" article.

These CE articles are made possible by Pharmacy PAC, your advocate in promoting a pharmacy-friendly legislative agenda in Lansing and Washington, D.C.

pharmacists could potentially face a major economic blow. Unfortunately, legislators have to be generalists; they have to make decision on the behalf on all professions, which means many legislators do not fully understand the profession of pharmacy. This reality has been exponentially exacerbated by the establishment of terms limits in our State Legislature. As soon as senior legislators start to comprehend the complexities of the medical community and the way the different professions interact, their time has expired and a freshman legislator equipped with little or no experience replaces them. Therefore, there is a perpetual battle that must be waged to ensure that the decisions made to generate revenue do not have detrimental effects on the profession.

By funding Pharmacy PAC, pharmacists enable the PAC legislative team to have a significant presence in Lansing through continuous lobbying efforts. The Pharmacy PAC team donates, holds fundraisers and meets with legislators on a daily basis, which brings the concerns and the voices of every pharmacist in Michigan to Lansing in a way that no other avenue of grassroots is able to accomplish. In fact, supporting Pharmacy PAC is the most important allocation of funds that a pharmacist can make, regardless of the amount of the donation. Pharmacy PAC pools together these donations, large and small, and couples them with years of experience and knowledge, not only about the

legislature but also about the profession, and mounts a relentless, methodic attack in a way that simply cannot be duplicated by any single pharmacist. The most important aspect of a grassroots movement is having an interest group at the source of the legislative process, constantly and intelligently fighting for, or against, the bills that matter. Pharmacy PAC is the fruition of the pharmacy grassroots effort; by supporting Pharmacy PAC a pharmacist truly is protecting not only the patients, but also the profession.

Netroots

Netroots efforts have the same core concepts that are found in grassroots efforts; but instead of putting our feet on the "grass" to impact the legislature and promote the pharmacy advocacy cause, we focus our attention to computer technology and the Internet. The netroots effort is an effective and necessary step in promoting and practicing pharmacy advocacy. This approach also has many distinct benefits when contrasted with the grassroots effort. However, this does not imply that utilizing grassroots tactics are not as important or beneficial. If pharmacy advocates hope to have a significant and effective impact on the legislature, it is crucial that they incorporate both grassroots and netroots. Therefore, we now turn to the different avenues that pharmacists' can utilize when implementing a successful netroots effort.

Blogging and Chat Rooms

Similar to the first avenue a pharmacist should undertake within a grassroots effort, the first avenue in a netroots effort is spreading the concerns of pharmacists with the community. The benefit to using the netroots avenue to spread the knowledge of the issues that affect pharmacists is that the audience reached via the Internet is exponentially larger. By starting or participating in blogs and chat rooms, pharmacists have the ability to inform vast amounts of the population about the potential effects that proposed legislation or policies could have on the profession and its patients. In addition to the increased size of the audience, the benefit of this avenue is it takes little effort and can be done whenever an individual has a few spare minutes and access to the Internet. By taking a few minutes to articulate and post your concerns, you provide a permanent and immediate resource for individuals to discover the problems that are facing pharmacy. Blogs and chat rooms are quick, easy, permanent and far-reaching approaches for pharmacy advocates to voice their concerns. Utilizing technology to inform the public is not the only avenue of the netroots effort that is beneficial; it also allows pharmacists to stay informed, connected and organized.

Staying Informed and Connected Through Networking Sites

The legislature may seem as though it

moves at a geriatric pace at times; however, our lives are busy, and it can become overwhelming to find the time to stay current on the issues being discussed. The netroots approach to pharmacy advocacy holds several solutions to this problem. Many pharmacists already utilize networking websites such as Facebook, Plaxo, LinkedIn, Twitter and MySpace to keep in touch and communicate with family and friends. What many do not realize are these Web sites hold perfect venues to form and build relationships with other pharmacists from different areas in the state who share the same concerns. They allow for fast and efficient methods of communicating and organizing members of the pharmacy community when an issue arises that calls for action. In a matter of seconds, a pharmacist can alert other members of the community about proposed legislation and budget proposals, interesting changes in the legislature and other important information. Staying organized, connected and informed is crucial when trying to mount successful social movements.

PRN: The Pharmacist's Most Important Form of Netroots and Best Line of Defense

The netroots avenue that has the potential to make the most significant impact for pharmacy advocacy is MPA's Pharmacy Response Network (PRN). So, what is the PRN and how does it work? The PRN is a free resource that destroys all the excuses and boundaries that exist for pharmacists not to get involved in pharmacy advocacy. It does this by doing the grunt work and providing an easy avenue for pharmacists to get involved. First, PRN keeps pharmacists informed. MPA's legislative team and Pharmacy PAC are on the front lines of the political scene in Lansing and are able to ascertain the details about proposed legislation that could have an effect on the profession of pharmacy. MPA understands that many pharmacists do not know how to get their hands on this information, and if they do know, they do not have the free time to do the research. This latter problem leads us to the second benefit of the PRN, which is that it makes pharmacy advocacy timely. PRN provides pharmacists that join with an informational e-mail that includes a template and a link to voice their concern about the bill to their legislators. The third benefit to the PRN is that it organizes the pharmacy community. This benefit can be demonstrated best by re-enacting a hypothetical but real and reoccurring conversation that happens in Lansing amongst legislators:

"Hey, my pharmacist sent me an e-mail today and it said . . ."

And, there are two possible ways the colleague can answer. The first and most frequent reply is, "I have not heard anything about that yet . . ." And then the conversation goes to another topic.

The second reply that will become much more likely when more pharmacists join the PRN is, "You know, I was just talking about this e-mail with a few other legislators. It seems as though pharmacists all over the state are worried about . . ."

As mentioned above and demonstrated in this conversation, the crucial element to any advocacy movement, including grassroots and netroots, is that the members promoting their cause stay organized. If all the pharmacists in Michigan approached their legislators with their different concerns all at once, it obviously would not get much accomplished. The PRN keeps pharmacists organized, allowing them to move simultaneously with precision and information, which is paramount.

The way the PRN works is simple. It begins with a pharmacist requesting to join the network, which is obviously the most important part of the process and accomplished by sending your information into MPA or signing up online. Once the new member is added, s/he just continues on with his/her life until MPA and Pharmacy PAC discover a legislative issue that affects pharmacists. Once this occurs, an e-mail is sent to PRN members from all over the state containing information about the issue and its possible effects on the profession. There are only two requests that MPA and Pharmacy PAC make of PRN members. First, that the members use the template within the e-mail to compose a personal message to their legislators, articulating the concerns that pharmacists have about the issue, and send it to them. Second, that the members then send the notification to five other pharmacists informing them that it is important they become involved. That is it! That is all that it takes to become a very effective pharmacy advocate: two easy and fast actions that do not take more than 10-15 minutes, is free and will have a lasting effect on the preservation of the profession.

You Know Why. You Know How. Do Not Wait. Become a Pharmacy Advocate!

Now having read this article, four concepts should be apparent. First, inaction is action. By making the choice not to get involved, a pharmacist has made the choice to accept whatever the legislature doles out, be it good or bad. Second, the cost of apathy for pharmacists is enormous. Currently, there are

issues that pharmacists should be concerned about, like national health care, medical marijuana and budget cuts to the health care community due to the economic crisis. All these issues are taking place right now, are intimately tied to the government and legislature, and could potentially change the profession of pharmacy all together. If pharmacists do not get involved, the monumental changes that take place could be negative instead of positive. Third, now the different ways to get involved are obvious. We no longer can use the ignorance excuse. The intricacies of grassroots and netroots efforts have been explained, expounded and simplified; our excuses are gone. Finally, the most important message of this article is take advantage of the two resources that require little time and money, and both pay huge dividends: Pharmacy PAC and the PRN. Learning more about the essence of grassroots and netroots, one should clearly understand that these two avenues, Pharmacy PAC and the PRN, are essential to the pharmacy advocacy effort. Any approach that a pharmacist can utilize is helpful; however, these two are easy, effective and crucial. Pharmacists who donate to Pharmacy PAC are hiring a team of highly-skilled professionals who understand the complexities of the Michigan government. They are also taking a significant step to ensure that their issues reach the legislature in a relentless, effective and methodical manner. The PRN is just as important, and it is free! The PRN requires next to nothing on behalf of its members, yet in return the members are provided with a priceless network, enabling them to shape the future of the profession by staying informed and organized.

The government and the legislation it enacts has a significant effect on the profession of pharmacy. Conversely, when pharmacists get involved in the pharmacy advocacy movement, whether it be grassroots and/or netroots, they put themselves in a position to shape the decisions that are made by the government. The primary concern for pharmacists and pharmacy advocates is to protect patients. For pharmacists to protect their patients, they must protect their profession. In order to protect their profession, pharmacists have to become involved in the legislative process. We now know that there are ways of getting involved that are effective, easy and inexpensive; there are no excuses.