

OPINION: CONGRATS - YOU'RE AN ADVOCATE

Ethan Fairbanks, MS4, and Janak Mukherji, MS4

HOW DO YOU ADVOCATE for patients? If you've already interviewed for residency, I'm sure you've heard this question. If not, you will. What does advocacy look like for students? Some senior attendings (and even peers) argue that medical students should focus solely on their studies because they will have an entire career to advocate for patients. This argument exists, unknowingly or not, to protect those already holding formal positions of power. Rather, I would argue that as future providers, we must show the public that we do care, that we are fighting for them, and that we have earned the privilege of their trust.

I believe that there is a reason why my patients have allowed me to work with them. It isn't just out of politeness. Our position as future providers gives us a certain form of innate trust. We are taught, both through our curriculum as well as lived experiences in clerkships, the real-world impacts of healthcare policies. Thus, I believe that we have an obligation to not only become healers, but also moral messengers for change.

While we have no political or monetary standing to enact this, we are granted an amorphous power through the trust and relationships we build with our communities. On our own, this power may feel small and insignificant. However, if wielded together alongside community organizers and other healthcare professionals, we can build a better system.

When I started writing this, an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent had just extrajudiciously shot, and ultimately murdered, Renee Good, a law-abiding citizen. As she was bleeding out with the car door open to the public, a man stating he was a physician pleaded with agents to check her pulse and try to provide life-saving measures. Their response should shake us all, as future doctors, to our cores: "I don't care."

By the time I finished writing this, ICE had just killed Alex Pretti, an ICU nurse at the Minneapolis VA. This sentiment of indifference towards life and death has

historically targeted underserved and minority communities but truly impacts everyone in our country. Whether you like it or not, this will affect you and your patients, regardless of specialty.

This lack of humanity becomes more acceptable every time an insurance company denies coverage of necessary care. It is occasionally highlighted when whistleblowers, such as Dr. Linda Peeno, describe experiences of being rewarded for choosing the profits of insurers over people's lives. This is an open display of indifference to the well being of not only our patients, but of providers too. You can see this through our country's medical debt industry, with over 500,000 bankruptcies due to medical debt annually, overburdened emergency departments assuming the role of primary care clinics, and a life expectancy that has not kept up with economically comparable countries.

Unlike the firing of a gun, social murder through the inability to access care or medications is a slow, insidious, and often costly process.

Worse than a claims denial, 7.8 million individuals are expected to entirely lose access to insurance per estimates from the Congressional Budget Office as a direct result of the passing of the "Big Beautiful Bill" (BBB). Our very own state legislature is sleepwalking towards catastrophe this fall, during which federal Medicaid spending cuts from the "BBB" are expected to cause over 300,000 Hoosiers to lose healthcare access. This loss will exacerbate the negative profit margins already being experienced by 16 rural hospitals (29% of our state's total) and push additional facilities into risk of closure. This is without even considering the impact of the expired Affordable Care Act enhanced premium tax credits.

It is unfair and unjust to revoke healthcare from Hoosiers already at an economic disadvantage. Rather than accept this we must in unison demand a better path forward. Burnout is not only from long hours, it also comes in the form of moral injury from having the knowledge to help someone but not the means to provide it.

The solution we propose is not radical. It is in fact the

fiscally responsible choice: end the public-private partnership between our state and the managed care organizations (private insurance companies) running Medicaid. Connecticut underwent this process in 2012 and has since saved over \$4 billion. They were even able to expand their “HUSKY A” program, which is their equivalent to the Healthy Indiana Plan, by over 100,000 enrollees. In Indiana, our estimated annual savings of 10%-17% are expected to total between \$497-870 million by taking our current 2026 and 2027 state budgets and using the methods shared by Physicians for a National Health Program in their “Removing the Middlemen from Medicaid” report.

For better or for worse, we are a part of this system. How can we play a role in improving it? I’ve found that people often will choose to volunteer at a student clinic or take the time to connect their patients with resources, and I do not intend to downplay the importance of these actions. However, there is power in numbers - taking part in Physician Advocacy Day at the state-house, joining local community organizers, or co-drafting a legislative bill with your classmates and discussing policies directly with legislators can be effective methods to demonstrate people-power. An excellent example

of well-utilized “medical student power” can be seen through Reclaim Idaho’s 2017 campaign which forced the state’s legislation to adopt ACA expansion via ballot measure.

We in Indiana must similarly organize with the goal of building an infrastructure to mobilize ourselves in response to crises in healthcare as they happen, not wait until after people have already died. We, and our patients, cannot afford to wait for someone else to save us.

For me, this has taken the shape of involving myself in Students for a National Health Program, speaking to legislators in Washington D.C., and working to build more collaboration between student and community groups such as Hoosier Action. Before I graduate in May and begin the next phase of my career, I plan on being surrounded by white coats in Indianapolis demanding that our representatives allow for a healthcare system that lives up to our Hippocratic Oath. This work helps to fill my cup as it is drained by a system of indifference. Find what fills yours.

Ethan Fairbanks and Janak Mukherji are MD students at Indiana University. They can be reached at etcfair@iu.edu and jmukher@iu.edu.