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Med Student Empowerment on the Annual Lobby Day



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I DON'T REMEMBER the first time I felt true empowerment. It seems an ephemeral emotion - I can't quite decide when I feel it and when I don't. In 2001, as an undergraduate student, I joined in protesting the University of Michigan's contract with Nike in front of Lee C. Bollinger's house, then president of the university. There was a sense among all 50 of us that we could tear down the walls of the university's contracts and bring a little bit more justice to our world.

Maybe we were naïve, maybe we were hopelessly hopeful. But in those younger days, we knew that our voice would make a difference. Two years later, before extending its contract with Nike, the University of Michigan demanded Nike change its working condition standards around the globe. Nike didn't. The next year, the University of Michigan signed a contract with Adidas.

Medical school is a different beast in and of itself. I have a constant vision of myself as a marble rolling through a downhill maze. There is nearly no control over where I go. I simply fall into the next obstacle with no chance of slowing down or going back.

This sense of loss of control is, to me, the antithesis of empowerment. I am, in some ways, completely disempowered. I do what is expected with little time to reflect on what happens before the next obstacle is before my eyes. Many of you may have experienced this during your education. Yet in this journey of jumping through one burning hoop after the next, there is one event that has been marked on my calendar as the day where I feel empowered of not only my own life but of the future of our healthcare system.

For the last 5 years, on a day in January, medical students from across California have gathered in Sacramento to rally support for statewide healthcare reform and universal healthcare. On January 11 and 12, the 5th annual Lobby Day had over 550 medical students come together in Sacramento to present a unified front for health care reform in California. This was the largest lobbying effort for universal healthcare ever!

With the support of the California Legislative Alliance (CaLA), the California Physician's Alliance (CaPA), and the American Medical Student Association (AMSA), the students gathered at the UC Davis School of Medicine on Sunday, January 11 for an afternoon of education. Students learned about the

legislative process, the advantages of universal healthcare, the details of SB 840 (the universal healthcare bill currently in the Senate), and instruction on how to lobby at the state capitol.¹

Presenters at the training day included Senator Sheila Kuehl, original author of SB 840, Sara Rogers, former healthcare policy analyst for Senator Kuehl, and Parker Duncan, CaPA Fellow.

One breakout session facilitated discussion between students on healthcare reform and allowed for students to think about the arguments for and against universal healthcare and SB 840. A second breakout session was designed to have lobbying teams discuss their detailed strategy on how to lobby for SB 840.

Monday, January 12 began at 11 a.m. with a march from the Embassy Suites hotel to the capitol. Students, all wearing white coats, proclaimed their support for universal healthcare and SB 840 with chants, posters, and simply their presence. Once at the steps of the capitol, multiple speakers, including Senator Mark Leno, rallied support and excited the crowd. Members of the press were present, interviewing student leaders and rally speakers. The energy was explosive and contagious; one could feel the power of the hundreds of students in their white coats rallying for universal healthcare.

Then began the real lobbying efforts. Teams of 5-8 students visited legislators or office staff throughout the state capitol to discuss the benefits of universal healthcare and to encourage legislators to support SB 840. Students sat for a half hour with each legislator for a forthright conversation about healthcare reform. In all, over 125 offices were visited.

Legislators were asked to support SB 840 and to continue the discussion with their fellow law-makers and their constituents. Some were convinced to vote for SB 840; others were convinced to be co-authors of the bill. In the end, however, it was the conversations that the medical students brought to the state capitol that will have the most profound effect.

The 550 students returned to medical school the next day with a unique experience and a renewed passion for healthcare reform. The stories of their experiences at the state capitol bounced around the walls of their classrooms and hallways. Today, the conversation of healthcare reform and universal healthcare remains alive in all California medical schools in part because of Lobby Day and the transformative experiences the students had there.

When I reflect on Lobby Day, on the experience of being a part of this enormous movement of medical students from all across California, I begin to remember my sense of empowerment. Even as I return to class and tumble once again down the roller coaster path that is medical school, I know that I am capable of creating change, of engaging my legislator, and of being a part of group that believes in its ability to affect its future.

SB 840 was the universal healthcare bill passed with a majority vote in both 2007 and 2008, only to be vetoed by Governor Schwarzenegger. The political future of SB 840 remains uncertain; almost inevitably, the fate of the bill rests in the fingertips of California's voters when the bill is placed on the ballot as a proposition.

But what is clear is that universal healthcare, in the eyes of many California medical students, is the future of our healthcare system. Lobby Day will occur, once again, in January 2010 in Sacramento, our own backyard. If you have any questions or would like more information, feel free to contact me.

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1. SB 840 passed the Legislature, but was vetoed by the Governor on September 30 because of its cost.