Tips for Meeting with Your Elected Officials

Meeting with your elected officials about issues affecting the practice of surgery is a lot easier than most people think. From our local city council, elected leaders in Tallahassee to our federal leadership in Washington, remember — our legislators work for us!

Surgeons believe that they cannot lobby because they are not lobbyists. *Wrong*. One does not need to be a professional lobbyist to advocate on issues important to surgeons. A lobby visit is quite simply a meeting for you to tell your elected representative what you think about a certain issue or bill, and to try to get him or her to take action on that issue. Remember that meeting with a key staff person is often just as good, if not better than, meeting with the legislator. Staff often keep up with the bulk of the information presented during the legislative session.

Requesting Your Meeting

- Make your request in writing and follow up with a call to the appointment secretary/ scheduler.
- Suggest specific times and dates for your meeting.
- Let them know what issue and/or legislation you wish to discuss.
- Make sure they know that you are a constituent.

Preparing for Your Meeting

- Know what you want to talk about.
- Decide who will attend the meeting. Bringing more than four people can be hard to manage in small offices. Keep it small, but bring people who have information or personal stories that will drive your point home.
- Agree on talking points. It's tough to make a strong case for your position when you are disagreeing in the meeting! If a point is causing tension in the group, leave it out.
- Plan out your meeting. People can get nervous in a meeting, and time is limited. Be sure that you lay out the meeting beforehand, including who will start the conversation.
- Decide what you want achieve. What is it you want your elected official to do? Vote for or against the bill? Make a commitment to introduce or co-sponsor legislation? Asking your legislator or his or her staff member to do something specific will help you know how successful your visit has been!

During the Meeting

- Be prompt and patient. Much like surgeons, elected officials run on very tight schedules. Be sure to show up on time for your appointment and be patient — it is not uncommon for legislators to be late or to have your meeting interrupted by other business.
- Keep it short and focused! You will have twenty minutes or less with a staff person, and as little as ten minutes if you meet with your elected official. Make the most of that brief time by sticking to your topic.

- Bring up any personal, professional, or political connections to the elected official that you may have. Start the meeting by introducing yourselves and thanking the legislator for any votes he or she has made in support of your issues, and for taking the time to meet with you.
- Stick to your talking points! Stay on topic, and back up your statements with no more than five pages of materials that you can leave with your elected official.
- Provide personal and local examples of the potential impact of the legislation. *This is one of the most important things you can do in a lobby visit.*
- Saying "I don't know" can be a smart political move. You need not be an expert on the topic you are discussing. If you don't know the answer to a question, it is fine to tell your legislator that you will get that information for him or her. This gives you the chance to put your strongest arguments into their files, and allows you to contact them again about the issue. Never make up an answer to a question — giving wrong or inaccurate information can seriously damage your credibility!
- Set deadlines for a response. Often, if an elected official hasn't taken a position on legislation, they will not commit to one in the middle of a meeting. If he or she has to think about it, or if you are meeting with a staff member, ask when you should check back in to find out what your legislator intends to do about your request. If you need to get information to your legislator, set a clear timeline for when this will happen. That way, you aren't left hanging indefinitely.

After the Meeting

- Right after the meeting, compare notes with everyone in your group to determine what the elected official committed to do and what follow-up information you committed to send.
- Each person who took part in the meeting should promptly send a personal thank you letter to the elected official.
- Follow up in a timely fashion with any requested materials and information.
- If the elected official or staff member doesn't meet the deadline for action you agreed to during the meeting, ask him or her to set another deadline. Be persistent and flexible!

Remember that a personal meeting with legislator is one of the best opportunities to demonstrate that there is a constituency for civil liberties in your district.

One last point: have fun! Legislators need to hear from you about issues dealing with surgeons. You are the experts and elected representatives want, and seek out, your counsel. Your voice on issues is important!