



Civic Engagement as a Pathway to Meaningful Medical Student Engagement on the Social Determinants of Health

Journal of Health Disparities Research and Practice

Volume 14 | Issue 4

Article 2

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2021

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Recommended Citation

Reardon, Alexander; DeBlanc, Jennie; and Martin, Alister (2021) "Civic Engagement as a Pathway to Meaningful Medical Student Engagement on the Social Determinants of Health," *Journal of Health Disparities Research and Practice*: Vol. 14: Iss. 4, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/jhdrp/vol14/iss4/2>

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Abstract

The social determinants of health have gained increasing prominence in medical education, but medical students and professionals alike are under-prepared to address those determinants. There is a growing body of evidence that voting and other forms of civic engagement affect the health of patients and communities. Registering patients in healthcare settings offers students and professionals an opportunity to impact their patients' health beyond the clinical encounter. Medical students are particularly well suited to this work for a variety of reasons, including increasingly positive attitudes toward this kind of advocacy, increasing diversity in the medical student body, and lighter clinical and administrative loads. The 2020 election made these effects clear as students prepared over 18,000 patients and their peers to vote.

Keywords

civic health; voter registration; medical education; social determinants of health

Cover Page Footnote

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS Contributors: Ms. Frani O'Toole, Dr. Maria Santos, and Dr. Madeline Grade helped to edit this paper. Funders: This paper did not require funding. Prior presentations: N/A



Journal of Health Disparities Research and Practice

Volume 14, Issue 4, Fall 2021, pp. 12-15

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ABSTRACT

The social determinants of health have gained increasing prominence in medical education, but medical students and professionals alike are under-prepared to address those determinants. There is a growing body of evidence that voting and other forms of civic engagement affect the health of patients and communities. Registering patients in healthcare settings offers students and professionals an opportunity to impact their patients' health beyond the clinical encounter. Medical students are particularly well suited to this work for a variety of reasons, including increasingly positive attitudes toward this kind of advocacy, increasing diversity in the medical student body, and lighter clinical and administrative loads. The 2020 election made these effects clear as students prepared over 18,000 patients and their peers to vote.

Keywords: civic health; voter registration; medical education; social determinants of health

INTRODUCTION

In the 19th century, Rudolph Virchow counseled his medical students that medicine was a social science and that illness was born from the patient's social circumstances (Virchow, 1848). He challenged his students to learn about and intervene at both the social and political levels if they wished to treat disease successfully and create healthier communities. While the field of public health has widely accepted that the condition of the patient inside the exam room is inextricably linked to the conditions of the community that the patient lives in, medical education has yet to significantly reflect these advances in understanding (Duffy, 2011). As the outsized role of social determinants of health continues to become clearer, we must explore how and if we will adapt teaching to align with Dr. Virchow's counsel more closely.

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The social determinants of health, or the complicated links between personal, institutional, political, and societal factors, can be hugely impactful on health, with researchers estimating that up to 80% of what makes up a patient's health is concerned with these factors (Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014). However, the focus of medical education as it pertains to the social determinants of health has primarily been on understanding 'what' those determinants are, rather than 'how' to address them (Sharma et al., 2018). It is unclear whether teaching students that housing, access to healthy food, or working conditions impact people's daily lives has any significant impact on medical inequity (Sharma et al., 2018).

And while food insecurity and housing status have obvious implications on health, even flawless screening and referrals to social services would not change the fact that it is the unequal distribution of these maladies and resources that creates health disparities. History points us toward suffrage as an avenue for changing this distribution. Following the expansion of the franchise to include some women in 1920, there were dramatic decreases in maternal and infant mortality. This decrease is likely multifactorial, but the subsequent passage of the Sheppard-Towner Act of 1921, which greatly deepened our nation's public health system's commitment to mothers and infants, undeniably played a role (Ehlinger & Nevarez, 2020). While critics may argue that civic advocacy is out of the purview of the medical profession, as described by Huddle (2011), the growing body of evidence linking civic health to community-level health outcomes and adoption of policies that benefit the most marginalized patients make it a necessity (Brown et al., 2020). In 2020, medical professionals of all levels of experience took aim at these inequities by empowering patients to vote, engage in their communities, and influence policy that shapes their health.

The Impact of Medical Students on the 2020 Elections

Vot-ER is a nonpartisan voting registration project founded at Massachusetts General Hospital. The program uses badges with QR and text message codes, posters, and discharge paperwork to offer patients a convenient and nonpartisan, optional opportunity to register to vote or to check their registration status while in clinical settings. Clinicians guided patients and colleagues through the Vot-ER registration application on their phone in 90 seconds or fewer. These efforts cumulatively resulted in over 46,000 people who were helped to vote in the 2020 presidential election (Martin et al., 2021). It leverages a precedent formed in the 1993 National Voter Registration Act encouraging hospitals to do nonpartisan voter registration drives on-site, provide voter registration forms, and even request to be state-designated voter registration sites (Manchanda, 2012).

In addition to clinicians, Vot-ER wanted to target medical students as partners as they are uniquely positioned to carry this work forward for a variety of reasons. For instance, students often have smaller patient panels than their supervisors, and thus have more time. While guidance exists on how to be an effective patient advocate with a busy schedule, comparative schedule flexibility and reduced administrative workload may enable students to engage in expansive, effective advocacy (Hancher-Rauch et al., 2019).

The increasing diversity of the medical student body also suits students well for work on civic engagement. A survey by Gruen et al. (2006) found that, among a nationally representative sample of physicians, identifying as either an under-represented minority group or as female was associated with a higher likelihood of being "civic-minded"; that is, strongly believing in the importance of community participation, political involvement, and collective advocacy. Diversity

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among medical school applicants, matriculants, and graduates has grown since that survey (*Diversity in Medicine*, 2019). The Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME) in the United States also adopted accreditation standards requiring medical schools in North America to include service-learning opportunities and curricula about “societal problems” (LCME, 2020). However, limitations to full implementation exist, such as limited opportunities at academic medical centers to do meaningful work with marginalized groups.

The Healthy Democracy Campaign, which was *Vot-ER*’s collaborative effort with the American Medical Student Association’s *Med Out the Vote* effort, charged medical students on their clinical rotations at 80 medical schools to add additional questions to their social histories, including questions on voter registration and voter preparedness (Ruxin et al., 2021). Unlike food insecurity or housing status, with online voter registration, most times, students can address patient concerns about voting within the same clinical encounter. Students additionally provided “Civic Health Checkups” to patients at COVID-19 testing sites after their nasopharyngeal swabs and prompted patients to consider registering to vote during the discharge process. Not just confined to the exam room, they hosted voter registration text banks over Zoom, and mobilized social media and email to reach their peers.

Collectively, students got over 18,000 people ready to vote through voter registration or mail-in ballots in 2020 via the *Vot-ER* platform. Working with and learning from leaders at *Vot-ER* offered students invaluable experiential learning on how to reframe social inequities as a problem that can be influenced through patient empowerment. Last summer’s organizing at *Vot-ER* is a proof of concept for medical student-driven voter registration and civic engagement that is rooted in accessible technology, teamwork, gamification, and non-partisan advocacy.

Call to Action

To date, there are no medications or procedures that are curative for inequality. There will not be a USMLE board question that asks for the next best step in managing systemic racism. But our understanding of how those factors influence health is growing day by day, and students are demanding medical education that addresses these injustices. By incorporating discussions of our patients’ civic engagement into the clinical encounter we can offer an avenue for just that, continuing the important work that Rudolph Virchow highlighted centuries ago.

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Journal of Health Disparities Research and Practice Volume 14, Issue 4, Fall 2021

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