

Advocacy 101 for doctors: getting the word out

Doctors' voices are both listened to and trusted when it comes to public health and other issues – as can be clearly seen from the success of the lobbying and advocacy work of the federal AMA. Public affairs director **John Flannery** explains how to get the mix right, and what you can do to get your message heard.

"Always tell the truth. That way, you don't have to remember what you said."
– Mark Twain

The Australian Medical Association (AMA) is a very potent advocacy and lobbying organisation, and it is blessed with a unique set of features that puts it ahead of most of the other membership organisations and associations that operate in Canberra to influence government policy. It is independent of government. It has a large membership base, and the leadership and the membership are articulate and highly educated. It represents just about all the medical specialties, including GPs, and also speaks for medical students and doctors in training.

Throughout this process, the AMA is constantly in the media and constantly building up broad support in the community.

The media is overflowing with health and medical stories and every day journalists seek expert comment. More often than not, the AMA provides that comment – on everything from the major health reform agenda, to hospital waiting lists, to obesity, to smoking, to swine flu or the latest wonder cure for colds.

The AMA has members in every electorate of the country. Along with nurses and pharmacists, doctors are the most respected professionals in the community. Doctors hold a very special place in the towns and suburbs in which they live and work. They provide the local voice and the local focus for the AMA 'message'.

On the big issues – such as health reform today or the 'medical indemnity crisis' a few years ago – the AMA has the capacity to activate this national lobbying machine. It has done so with considerable success on many occasions. That is why governments have to listen to the AMA. They may

not agree with what the AMA is saying, but they cannot ignore it or take it for granted.

The machine

While the AMA president and the other elected officials are full-time doctors and part-time advocates, the modern AMA president knows they are expected to be on call 24/7 for media calls.

This is a big demand on their time – especially if the president happens to live in Perth with the time difference. But AMA presidents do the hard yards because they know it builds the AMA profile and confirms the organisation's reputation in the media as a reliable source of information. In turn, this builds support in the general community as people respect the AMA's role in promoting and protecting the public health.

There are also two major annual set pieces that help drive home the AMA's commitment to public health and equitable access to quality health



services – Family Doctor Week, and the AMA Indigenous Health Report Card. Both are influential and very successful. There are also the Safe Hours Reports on doctors' working hours, especially young doctors, the AMA Public Hospitals Report Card, and a range of other reports, releases and submissions.

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Senior Medical Officer
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Applications to:
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spotlight

community. It is this media profile and public empathy that provide the AMA with so much clout when it comes time for a tough political debate.

The method

Not every company, organisation or association has the right mix of communication assets that the federal AMA enjoys, but that does not mean you cannot enjoy similar successes in lobbying, advocacy, or even good old-fashioned publicity. Here are a few simple tips:

1. Simple, positive messages. Always have simple positive messages that the public can relate to. If the punters relate to them and support them, so will the media and the politicians.

Remember the Tip O'Neill Rule: "All politics is local". No matter how complex the issue, bring it down to simple language and meaning for local audiences. Give them something they can relate to and understand – because it affects them and their families personally.

2. Make sure your spokespeople have media training. The level of media training can vary from person to person, but make sure that natural personal traits that are distinctive and/or popular are not 'trained out' of the person. The Australian public likes characters in the media and tires of 'conveyor belt' talking heads.

3. Be accessible. Make sure that you (or a contact for your organisation)

are available at any hour of the day, seven days a week. The more you are available – especially after hours and at weekends – the more journalists will return to you for comment, and the more likely they are to take up the issues you are promoting.

4. Be prepared. Never allow your spokesperson to be exposed to media questioning without being fully across the subject. Try to rehearse some tough questions before any interview. A Q and A brief is a good idea.

5. Be non-partisan. While it is acceptable to criticise or support any policy that comes from government or opposition, it is important to be balanced in your commentary. When something is good, say so. Do not allow your organisation to be portrayed as overly or overtly favouring one side – one political party – over the other.

6. Use locations. When making announcements or launching reports/products that lend themselves to an outdoor location, do it. Offices and boardrooms can be boring.

7. Use props if they help. Use the hospital, the stethoscope, the bed pan, and the machine that goes 'ping' when and where it adds value to the story.

8. Make life easy for the media. Members of the press gallery in Canberra and in the capital cities are very busy, especially during sitting



weeks. Whenever possible and appropriate, take your spokespeople to Parliament House or nearby to make it easier for the journalists – and camera crews – to attend. The same goes for suburban or rural media – make it simple for them to cover your story.

The important thing is to ensure that your positive messages outweigh the negative or discordant messages. Try at all times to keep the media and, most importantly, the public on your side. They are the ones who vote. When they support your messages in numbers, governments take notice.

John Flannery has been public affairs director for the Federal AMA since 2001, except for a short period in 2008-09 when he was media and communications director for the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission (NHHRC).

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