

FUNCTIONAL: Students taking an active role in shaping health policy

Medical school can be a demanding experience in many respects. While keeping abreast of an ever-increasing load of coursework, a medical student must learn to balance personal matters with clinical training. It requires extra energy to remain engaged with current events and therefore, as students, we sometimes feel that we will catch up with the real world after our education is completed. FUNCTIONAL (For Universal Care and Treatment In Our Nation At Last), a nearly two-year-old Jefferson Medical College (JMC) student organization, challenges students to become more politically involved. With the nature of healthcare in the US highly uncertain, we believe that students in the health professions can and should take an active role in shaping the future of the system in which we will soon be working.

Inarguably, the American health care system is in a state of crisis. For example, while the US spends nearly one sixth of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on health care, nearly 47 million people are uninsured.¹ Sixty-two percent of bankruptcies in 2007 were due to medical expenses.² Perhaps the most tragic statistic of all: over 45,000 deaths annually in the US can be attributed to a lack of health insurance.³ The bottom line here is that as future physicians working within this context, we have a vested interest in creating a health care system that keeps costs down, functions efficiently, and is accessible to all.

FUNCTIONAL can trace its roots to interaction via an online Jefferson Medical College class discussion board. As they prepared to begin their first year of medical school, students Chad Vogeler (JMC 2012) and Irmira Haq (JMC 2012) discovered they shared a common interest in healthcare reform. Vogeler and Haq, now co-chairs of the group, found that there were other like-minded students in the entering class. Two months into the first year, FUNCTIONAL was recognized as an official student organization at Jefferson.

The first members of FUNCTIONAL came into the group with the same general ideas about the

need for universal healthcare and, after weeks of self and peer education, adopted common goals. The beliefs and goals of the group were – and continue to be – shaped by the current state of health care and insurance coverage in the US. Motivated by what we see as huge failures in the system, and with hope for a brighter future in healthcare, FUNCTIONAL believes in the following principles:

- Providing universal cost-effective healthcare, especially primary and preventative care, will not only lead to better health outcomes, it also will significantly reduce the cost of health care for everyone.
- The United States spends more per capita than any other nation for healthcare, and has been ranked only 37th in the world in overall health system performance.⁴
- Healthcare reform is absolutely critical for a financially and physically healthy America, and the current system is too unsustainable to delay reform any longer. The costs and administrative red tape of our current system make it hard for patients to access care and for health care providers to do their jobs.
- Health care is a basic human right, and it is therefore our responsibility as future healthcare professionals to advocate for universal coverage through constructive and meaningful avenues.

As a group, we are officially non-partisan and believe that a single-payer system or “Medicare for all” is an ideal solution to remedy the problems facing American health care today. However, we also are in support of health care reform that gets us closer to the goal of universal coverage. This was evident in the health care legislation recently passed in the US Congress, which was a stepping-stone in that direction. We are cautious in our support,

however, as this legislation leaves millions of Americans uninsured and largely leaves our current broken system in place.

FUNCTIONAL collectively engages in political action to bring about a system of universal health care in our country. Our organization is committed to training student advocates who are capable of affecting positive political change in the systems in which we must practice.

We welcome all health professions students, not only those in medical school. We educate our peers, and give them opportunities to be involved. Our group has achieved this in a number of ways.

Since the inception of FUNCTIONAL, we have held educational discussions and movie screenings, hosted speakers and politicians on the Jefferson campus, and have coordinated lobbying efforts both online and in Harrisburg, PA and Washington, DC. Highlights of these activities included:

- An event which featured Congressman John Conyers (D-MI), author of the single-payer universal health care bill. This event was attended by over 200 people from Jefferson and the greater Philadelphia area.
- FUNCTIONAL, in conjunction with the American Medical Student Association (AMSA), organized a Pennsylvania State Lobby Day for medical students in Harrisburg. Thirteen student advocates from Jefferson participated in meetings with legislatures.
- FUNCTIONAL organized a Health Care Reform panel discussion which featured Theodore Christopher, MD, FACEP, Chair and Professor, Emergency Medicine, Thomas Jefferson University (TJU); Walter Tsou, MD, MPH, Board Advisor, Physicians for a National Health Program (PNHP), and former Health Care Commissioner of Philadelphia; and Daniel Louis, MA, Managing Director of the Center for

Research in Medical Education and Health Care, TJU.

We are honored to have worked with many different organizations and individuals in the Jefferson community over the past year and a half. In the future, FUNCTIONAL group members hope to diversify our connections around campus

and collaborate with other student organizations concerned with health care reform and access. We will continue our lobbying efforts, including the annual lobby day in Harrisburg and online email campaigns. We will also continue to educate our fellow students about current health care legislation and its effect on our future practice as physicians. Above all, FUNCTIONAL will remain

a group pledged to politically empower health professions students who firmly believe that health care access in America should be a right and not a privilege, and accessible to all. ■

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