

## **2006 Legislative Advocacy Conference**

This spring, the SOEM Advocacy Scholarship offered me the opportunity to attend the 2006 legislative conference in Washington DC. Since I am currently in the midst of an advocacy project, the conference was a worthwhile experience. I left the conference feeling better equipped to be an effective advocate for children.

Based at the Ritz-Carleton in Pentagon City, the conference began by enlightening uninformed pediatricians like me on the current political landscape and the pending legislative initiatives soon to affect us all. The concern over small business health plans (SB1955), proposed cuts to EMSC funds, and issues with Medicaid reimbursement were discussed. In this more informative phase of the conference we were made aware of the political and public health issues pertinent to pediatrics.

Awareness, however, is only the first step of advocacy. As speaker Jackie Noyes explained, "Awareness is understanding the process, procedures, objectives and obstacles." In my attempts to begin a child abuse program in our pediatric emergency room, I quickly learned that before I could develop strategies and advance my ideas, I had to be aware of what had already been accomplished and what stood in my way.

The second part of the conference focused on the more exciting components of most advocacy initiatives; advancement and action. There were many workshops on coalition building and media training. Congressional speakers also came to give their thoughts on effective advocacy skills. For emergency physicians concerned about the approaching hurricane season, disaster management was also discussed. Emergency room physicians discussed the lessons from Hurricane Katrina. As I listened to their frustrations, it occurred to me that the same skills needed to advocate for children are also needed in disaster management. Awareness, coalition building, and strategy development have to take place before the disaster hits.

Many who attended the conference found the legislative training most helpful. Focusing on SB1955 or the Associated Health Plan legislation, the conference set up mock interviews with legislators during which we tried to present our concerns about the legislation. Complete with interruptions, distracted stares, and uniformed questions, the interviews were great preparation for actually meeting with legislators. There was also a mock Senate session, in which policy was debated the same way that may happen in reality.

I think my full appreciation of this experience actually took place the following day, when I met with my legislators for the first time. Walking to Capitol Hill and into the Senate and House offices, I was initially a little overwhelmed. I realized, however, that I was prepared for my meetings and that talking to legislators is not as intimidating as it may seem. At my Senator's office (John Isakson), we discussed SB1955 and proposed EMSC budget cuts. I was surprised to learn that my Senator knew nothing about the EMSC budget cuts and promised to look into this issue. They listened and took notes as I

discussed SB1955. When I did return home, I had emails from their staffers asking me questions and presenting alternative view points. I now have a relationship with these offices and know that I can call or email when I have concerns about particular pieces of legislation.

Overall, this conference was a great experience and I would recommend it to anyone interested in advocating for children at any level. Whether dealing with a very local emergency room project or taking on a federal issues like Medicaid reimbursement or EMSC funding, the skills needed are the same. I left feeling more confident to pursue my current and future advocacy projects. Thanks SOEM for the opportunity!