

Political Advocacy

Engaging with politicians and political candidates

Doctors Nova Scotia would like to thank the Canadian Medical Association for allowing us to adapt their MD-MP content for this tool kit.

YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Politicians/candidates are always looking for a reliable expert source on health and health care. Physicians are largely viewed as knowledgeable leaders in their communities. This gives you an advantage when trying to engage with politicians/candidates. To make the most of this privilege, you need to understand the political system and how to engage in it.

If you have an issue you would like addressed you can speak with your representa-

tive/candidate, who can share your concerns with their political party. If you know something is not working well and have an idea about how it can be improved, you should talk to your representative/candidate, who can follow up with appropriate action. Offer to help move the issue forward.

Use this tool kit as a reference. The methods described in the following pages will ensure that you are fully equipped to play a role in the public policy process.

For assistance in your efforts, you are encouraged to contact Doctors Nova Scotia:

Government relations

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Media relations

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WORKING WITH POLITICIANS/CANDIDATES

YOUR REPRESENTATIVE WANTS

- To be well informed about local events
- To have reliable contacts for information about the constituency
- To be acknowledged for positive political action

To be an effective influencer, you'll need to build trust with your representative/candidate. You need to understand what issues are important to your community and what issues are important to your representative/candidate. Here are a few things to remember when working with your representative/candidate.

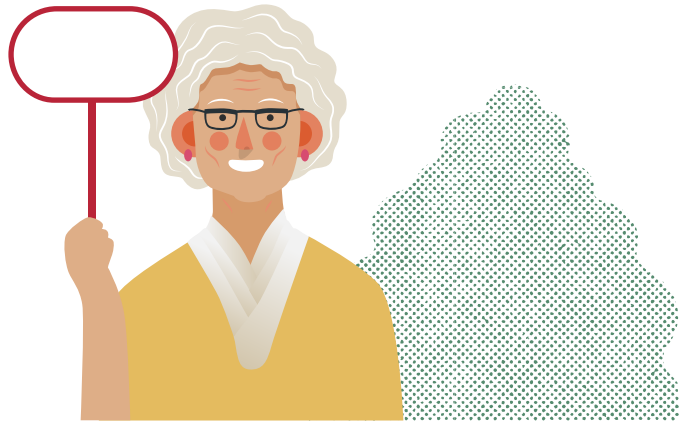
Politicians/candidates want to respond to their constituents. Therefore, they have an interest in listening to those who are willing to take the time to express their views, especially on an issue as important as health care.

Politicians/candidates are very busy. They are busy in Halifax or Ottawa when the house is sitting, attending caucus meetings and they also have to respond to their constituents, me-

dia requests and social media inquiries. You may need to make time in your busy schedule to accommodate a meeting with a politician.

Politicians/candidates rely on public opinion. As a physician you rely on science and medicine to inform your decisions. A politician's job depends on a keen awareness of the mood of the electorate. When speaking with politicians/candidates, understand the importance they place on anecdotal information and find ways to connect by telling patient stories.

Politicians/candidates want to hear from you. Personal contact is the most effective form of communication. In fact, the best way to get the attention of a politician or their staff is for you to contact their office personally.



COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR REPRESENTATIVE/CANDIDATE

Doctors Nova Scotia is always advocating on behalf of physicians and their patients, but it's important that these efforts are supported by individual physicians in communities. Through sharing your stories with politicians/candidates, you can influence public policy.

We often think the best way to change health policy or a government's position is to speak with the Minister of Health and Wellness or the Premier. However, representatives/candidates also play an important role in shaping health policy, especially when it is an issue that is particularly important to their constituents.

As important as it is to develop a relationship with your representative/candidate, it is equally important that you get to know their staff. In most instances, you will deal directly with the staff. The representative/candidate relies heavily on them for their knowledge and expertise. This is especially true if the representative/candidate is also a minister.

There are several different ways you can connect with your representative/candidate, but the best approach is meeting face-to-face. It may be difficult to arrange a meeting but it is always worth the effort.

Meeting face-to-face

Doctors Nova Scotia can help you arrange a meeting with your representative/candidate, or you can call the constituency office yourself. Keep in mind a representative will be in Halifax when the Legislature is in session. Be sure to tell the scheduling assistant you are a consti-

uent and explain the nature of your meeting request.

If you are inviting your representative/candidate to attend an event, it is best to send a written invitation and follow up by telephone a few days later. All letters should be addressed to the representative's office.

Telephoning their office

Telephone calls are useful when you want to discuss health-care issues with your representative/candidate or find out where they stand on an issue.

Usually you will speak with a member of their staff. Remember that this person represents your representative/candidate and is authorized to speak on their behalf. If you must speak with your representative/candidate rather than the staff, ask that they call you back, preferably at the end of the day. This is more likely to happen if you have already developed a relationship with the representative/candidate.

Writing letters

Politicians/candidates and their staff pay close attention to their mail – especially mail from constituents.

Taking the time to share your ideas and opinions on an issue in a thoughtful, well-written letter will be both appreciated and noted by your representative/candidate.

Write on personal or business stationery and include a return address – envelopes are often discarded.

TIPS FOR A PRODUCTIVE MEETING

Contact Doctors Nova Scotia for the latest talking points on current issues or relevant information for your representative. Your meeting should be:

- **Planned:** Prepare an agenda which includes your specific concerns and what you want the politician to do.
- **Focused:** Prepare up to three key messages.
- **Relevant:** Know how your issues relate not only to your representative, but also to their constituents.
- **Purposeful:** Have a clear and concise call to action or purpose, be aware of provincial and community perspectives and be prepared to answer questions.

TIPS FOR WRITING LETTERS

- Keep it local
- Keep it personal
- Keep it concise
- Keep it on message

Make it brief: No more than one, single-sided page. Discuss one subject per letter – do not dilute the importance of your main point.

Be constructive: If a proposed election platform or proposed policy takes the wrong approach, suggest an alternative.

Social media

Social media is a great way to share information, influence opinion and engage in conversations. If you're already active on social media, you can leverage it to reach candidates and the public. The best social media tools to reach politicians/candidates are Facebook and Twitter. To be most effective, keep your content professional and allow your personality to shine through.

If you're not already active on social media, consider setting up an account. Being active on social media takes time, so don't make this

leap without considering whether or not you will be able to maintain your account. There are lots of online tutorials to help guide you through the process and tell you the dos and don'ts of social media. If you do decide to make the leap, as you are in the early learning process, you may simply opt to support Doctors Nova Scotia content by liking and sharing our posts and tweets – that will keep you on safe ground.

› **Tip:** *Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter offer us an opportunity to express our personal and professional opinions. It's a strange mix of professional and personal marketing. Keep in mind that the lines between personal and professional are blurred when it comes to social media. Don't write anything you wouldn't like to see on the front page of the newspaper or on your patients' Facebook feed. Also, consider how your responses may come into play over the long term.*



PRESENTING YOUR ISSUE

YOUR REPRESENTATIVE DOES NOT WANT:

- To be talked down to or belittled
- To have their time wasted
- To hear repetitive versions of the same argument
- To be part of an emotional display of anger

Every issue presented to a politician/candidate is important to the person bringing it forward. You need to make sure you are using the right approach to ensure that your message is heard.

Tone: When engaging with politicians/candidates, make sure your tone is professional, firm, fair and reasonable. Share your experiences and patient stories, but make sure your anecdotes are grounded in facts. Try to present yourself as patient-centred, and remember that you have valuable, on-the-ground information that your representative/candidate values.

Respectfully disagree: You may not agree with your representative or a policy undertaken by government; however, you need to be respectful when presenting your point of view. Be prepared to share information, ask thoughtful questions and listen to the politician's point of view.

Build relationships: Try to build a relationship with your representative. Offer to be an expert resource. This will give you more opportunities to speak about issues that are important to you, your community and your patients.



WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Working with media is a great way to ensure our messages reach the public and political parties. Most members of the public view physicians as experts, and their trust in them is high. Members of the media will want to cover stories, even those that are provincial or federal in nature, and they will seek a local focus – something that directly affects their readers, listeners or viewers. To be successful, it's important that you keep up with what's already been reported in the news so you have the context and background to speak to issues appropriately.

If you raise an issue with your representative, they may ask you to share your concerns with media. The media can be used to engage in public discussion, influence public policy and enhance the profile of physicians. It is also an opportunity to demonstrate your leadership and commitment to advancing a health-system issue.

If you attend a public debate and ask a question, members of the media who are in attendance may want to interview you. Be prepared. If you have an established relationship with members of the media, you can indicate your interest to weigh in on health-care issues – be sure to establish the topics you wish to speak about.

Remember that although you are speaking to media, it's the public who must understand your messages. You are speaking to your family members, friends and the people you meet in the grocery store. Be sure what you say will make sense to them.

Letters to the editor

- Letters should be short and concise, 250 words or less.
- Keep sentences short and direct.
- Letters will only be published if the author includes their name and contact information.
- When responding to a previous letter, article or editorial, include the title and date it appeared in your letter.
- Responses should be timely; aim to respond within two days.
- Use community examples to help illustrate your point.
- Don't forget local newspapers.
- Keep your letter professional and patient centred.
- Share a copy of your letter with Doctors Nova Scotia.

Media interviews

- Be prepared – know your messages.
- Be professional.
- Be patient centred.
- Be factual – don't speculate.

In the resources section you'll find sample talking points and interview and on-camera tips.

If you don't have an established relationship with members of the media and would like support, contact Doctors Nova Scotia:

Barb Johnson

902-481-4915 or 902-483-6462 (cell)
1-800-563-3427 ext. 4915
barb.johnson@doctorsns.com

RESOURCES

Interview tips and tricks

1. Practice makes perfect.

Think about what you'd like to say. Make the key messages yours – put them in terms you are comfortable with. Determine the three messages you want to convey and practise delivering them.

2. Tell a story.

Relate a real-life story to your messages. People understand concepts best when they are given an example or told a relatable story.

3. Bridge.

When you get a question you can't or don't want to answer, bridge to what you want to say. For example: "That's a great question, what is important here is <insert key message>."

4. It's OK to say, "I don't know."

If you're asked a question and you don't know the answer, don't speculate. Say "I don't know." If it's something you can find out, tell the reporter you'll get back to them and then do so.

5. Keep it simple.

Avoid using jargon, acronyms and language people won't understand. Think about having a conversation with your mom or someone you meet in the grocery store. Remember the average Nova Scotian outside of Halifax has a high-school literacy level.

6. Keep your answers short.

Members of the media are looking for short sound bites. If you keep your sentences short, you are more likely to be quoted properly. Also, don't feel like you have to say everything at once. Allow the reporter to ask you questions to draw out your messages.

7. Don't fill in silence.

Sometimes media will deliberately create pauses during interviews because most people are uncomfortable with silence and will rush to fill it. Know this is a tactic, recognize it and stay silent.

8. Don't pick up negative language.

Sometimes media will ask you a question that is loaded with negative language, hoping you will pick up those negative terms and make them your own. Know this is a tactic and avoid the language when answering the question.

On-camera tricks

1. Look at the journalist, not at the camera.

Unless you are a regular on the news, it can be off-putting to the viewer to have a stranger looking directly at them in their home, even though it's through the television.

2. Keep eye contact with the journalist.

This can be difficult; it makes some people uncomfortable. If you have to break eye contact, look to the floor then back at the journalist. Avoid looking up – it makes the whites of your eyes visible, which looks odd to the viewer.

3. Keep still.

Small movements can look exaggerated on camera. Be careful not to sway and tone down hand movements. Excessive movement can be distracting for the viewer and can convey a sense of unease.

4. Watch your facial expressions.

Keep your facial expression neutral. Smilers tend to finish sentences showing off their pearly whites; this makes it difficult to edit the video. And remember: When the topic is not a happy one, a smiling face sends the wrong message.

5. Slow down.

Nerves can cause people to talk too fast. Slow down, breathe and deliver your message with conviction.

6. Be aware of what not to wear.

Small graphic patterns and bright white can strobe or make "noise" on camera. Wear a solid, darker colour (navy is a good choice), and wear what you typically would in your practice.

FINAL TIPS

- **Be on time for meetings.** Don't take more time for the meeting unless it is made available.
- **Answer questions honestly.** If you don't have an answer, offer to get back to your representative/candidate or their assistant with the information.
- **Be a good listener.**
- **Ask good questions** that will keep your agenda in focus.
- **Be flexible:** Plan a condensed version of your presentation in case the meeting time is shortened.
- **Prepare a printed summary** of your main points. Have enough handouts for participants in your group.
- **Bring a camera to capture** your meeting and share your photos through social media.