

A Passion for Policy

Students explore health-care reform



DAN PAGE

As a first-year, Lena Makaroun '12 spent her days doing dissections in anatomy lab and attending lectures in immunology and microbiology. But she also wanted to learn about health-care policy—something there's not much time for in the packed curriculum of medical school. After meeting other like-minded first-years, she helped form a student organization called the Center for Discourse on U.S. Health-care Policy. The group, which has grown to fifteen members, is dedicated to studying and debating issues in health-care reform. "It enhances our class experience," says co-founder Dan Wiznia '12. "We wanted to make sure we were aware of the policies being formed and how they will impact our practice of medicine. Especially with President Obama being elected, we knew there would be a change coming."

Twice a month, the students meet to discuss journal articles on topics such as the lessons the U.S. can learn from other countries, the impact of the income gap between specialists and primary care physicians, and Obama's proposals for universal coverage. "We have such a diversity of viewpoints and range of expertise," says Makaroun. "One student worked in health-care consulting, another was an economics major, and I'm interested in the social aspects of medicine. I appreciate that we maintain an objective outlook and come at these issues from all angles." Members often e-mail the authors of the articles to share their thoughts and ask for recommendations on additional source material. After reading a particularly intriguing piece in the *New England Journal of Medicine* on Medicare's limited ability to control rising spending on cancer drugs, they contacted the

author, Peter Bach, MD, an associate attending physician at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, who invited them to meet with him. “He helped us wade through the complexities of the ways drugs are priced,” says Rob Korom ’12.

The group has also organized two panel discussions, open to all students and faculty. In a December event called “Money Matters,” four doctors in different specialties explained how finances affect their practices. “A surgeon explained how he is reimbursed more when he conducts procedures than when he just sees patients; a psychiatrist spoke about switching to a cash-only practice because reimbursement from payers was too low,” says Wiznia. “It was interesting to get these perspectives and to have them play off each other.” In May the Center and another student group, the Business and Medicine Society, co-hosted a panel on comparative effectiveness research. Panelists included a former New York lieutenant governor, a vice president of the Kidney Foundation, an executive at McKinsey & Company, and the director of the primary care division of the Weill Cornell Physician Organization. In a lively exchange, each described the potential benefits of studies that compare the effectiveness of different treatments for a specific condition. They also talked about the controversies surrounding this type of research—whether it could lead to increasing regulation of physician decision-making, for example—and answered questions from the audience.

Center members are currently planning their first research project, on a topic that grew out of their policy discussions. “We were thinking about how to improve the way doctors interact with patients and came up with an idea for giving patients a written record of all the medications they’re supposed to be taking, which is something they rarely get in an outpatient setting,” says Korom. Working with professor of clinical medicine Robert Meyer, MD, and professor of clinical public health Madelon Finkel, PhD, the students completed a proposal for a trial in which patients would be given a list of their meds (and information on why they’ve been prescribed) at each visit. Afterward, the patients would be surveyed on whether they took their drugs, health outcomes, and how satisfied they were with their physician. Korom is working on the project full-time this summer, running a pilot study and applying for funding.

Students say their work with the Center is shaping their career and research interests.

Makaroun started medical school focused on global health, but says the group got her “extremely interested” in domestic health-care issues. As a result, she is doing a fellowship through the American Federation for Aging Research in which she’ll gather data on how much time geriatricians at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital spend on non-reimbursable care.

Next semester, Makaroun says, the Center for Discourse hopes to recruit new first-years, continue to host events, and compile their ideas into op-ed pieces. For her part, she plans to stay involved despite a demanding second-year schedule. Says Makaroun: “It’s such a proactive, passionate group.”

— Jen Uscher

Stress Test

Studying how mice (and men) react under pressure

Twenty-nine-year-old Conor Liston, who led a recent neuroimaging study on the cognitive effects of stress, doesn’t seem like a particularly anxious guy. “Overall,” he says, “I’m pretty level-headed and emotionally reserved in most situations—‘low reactive,’ as the psychologists would put it.”

Liston, who graduated from Harvard *summa cum laude* and is pursuing his MD-PhD at Weill Cornell and the Rockefeller University, has known his fair share of pressure. But he says that his interest in stress had nothing to do with personal experience—or the fact that he happened to be surrounded by an ideal group of human subjects. “I wanted to study stress because it’s a well-known risk factor for many neuropsychiatric conditions—yet unlike plenty of others, its effects on the brain can be measured,” Liston explains. “At the same time, it was obvious from day one that I had a perfect population at my fingertips, because medical students are very stressed out.”

Liston and his team corralled twenty male students in the midst of prepping for board exams and scanned their brains using fMRI, looking for stress-induced changes in the form of diminished activity in the medial prefrontal cortex. His study, which followed up on a similar experiment done at Mount Sinai on stressed rats foraging for food, was published in the January 2009 issue of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. It found that those who described themselves as relatively relaxed were able to shift their attention from one task to another more quickly than those who self-identified as stressed—and that the stressed-out group did show changes on fMRI, just as the mice had. The good news: a month after the exam, their stress levels—and brains—had gone back to normal. Liston now plans to study how stress affects other neural regions and whether responses differ according to gender. “It’s been my experience that all the things you’re supposed to do to beat stress—eat healthy food, exercise, and sleep an adequate amount—really do help,” he says by way of advice. “But it can be hard to stick to good habits when your time is limited.”



— Maura Kelly