From the Surgical Suite to the State Capitol: A Surgeon’s Journey in Healthcare Policy

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I was extremely fortunate to receive the American College of Surgeons Health Policy Scholarship for general surgeons this year. It could not have come at a more fortuitous time. I attended the Executive Leadership Program in Health Policy and Management at Brandeis University Heller School of Policy and Management in mid-June, barely one month after starting my new position as Chief Medical Officer for Medicaid in the state of Louisiana.

As the first surgeon to lead in this role, during the start of a Medicaid expansion where we shifted our focus from only pediatric, pregnant and disabled populations to also include the 19-64 year adult patients, the task was daunting. The beginning of my time at Medicaid felt like re-living the first few months of general surgery internship again. Do you remember that feeling? When you showed up on your first day as a young new doctor with a starched long white coat, a stethoscope slung around your neck, and pockets stuffed with handbook guides. Then you learn that you’re taking trauma call your first night and looking at a 30 hour stretch in the hospital. You’re handed your personal pager, the service pager, and the trauma pager, and your scrub pants sag at the drawstring waist as it’s weighted down with three pagers. And oh, by the way, go pronounce the deceased patient in room 308. By the end of the first day you’ve realized that surgeons don’t wear stethoscopes around their neck; by the end of the week your white coat is now rumpled, stained and missing buttons; and by the end of the month the handbooks are ditched as you learn that nurses are actually the best guides on everything from how to drop a Dobhoff to how to call a code.

More than a decade out from that initial trial by fire, now the challenges during my first month on this new job consisted of a Zika public health threat, Louisiana’s flooding medical disaster response, and the task of developing a comprehensive strategy to ensure quality healthcare for 1.6 million lives as we expanded healthcare access in the state.

Though I didn’t have a wise ICU nurse to show me the ropes, instead I did have lessons learned from Stewart Altman, who had advised Presidents from Kennedy to Obama and been the architect of healthcare policy for generations. I incorporated strategies from Jon Chilingerian, a previous Health Commissioner for the city of Boston, on how to find the “bottleneck” to decrease waste and inefficiency. I internalized Carlos Ghosn’s advice that the key qualities of leadership are to listen and connect with people. I drew upon Jody Hoffergit’s vision that a health system should focus not just on healthcare, but on health. Thanks to the ACS sponsored Leadership Program, I had a tool bag of strategies in effective leadership styles, managing complex systems, conflict negotiation, health policy economics, and group decision making. Ultimately, these were my training wheels as I grew in my role as a physician leader.

In addition to the skills learned, I also gained lifelong friends among classmates from the course. During the Louisiana Flooding, my urology classmate checked in to see how I was doing, and asked how he could help the flood relief efforts. During the Dallas police shootings, our whole class created an email outpouring of support for our Dallas classmates. I’ve hosted my vascular surgery classmate and his wife and children at my home, as we bonded over good food, great conversation, and health policy problem solving.
Overall, this was an extraordinarily valuable course. Participating in this course right as I was starting a new position in state health policy as Louisiana Medicaid’s Chief Medical Officer gave me strategies, tips and knowledge that I have used hands on every single day, as well as a network of close friends and colleagues. I can’t say enough how much this has benefited me with my work in healthcare policy. I am truly indebted to the American College of Surgeons for this life changing experience, which enabled me to grow as a surgeon and as a leader.

(Dr. SreyRam Kuy, recipient of the American College of Surgeons 2016 Health Policy Scholarship for General Surgeons, meeting her health policy hero, Stewart Altman, at Brandeis University June 18, 2016 during which Dr. Altman regaled the class with hilarious inside stories about advising healthcare policy to leaders spanning from President Kennedy to President Obama.)