



National Society for Histotechnology
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2019 ASCLS, NSH, and Affiliates Legislative Symposium Summary

By: Sara Stahl



It's been several days and in spite of my copious use of hand sanitizer, I'm still miserable on the couch with a cold, a virus most likely picked up on my travels through notoriously germier airports and metro stations. Despite my red nose, sore throat, and fatigue weary brain, I wouldn't change a thing about my experience at the ASCLS/NSH Legislative Symposium. In the end, I gained so much more than I ever could have imagined.

I came away with a much better understanding of the difficulties facing laboratories, as well as feeling like a true advocate for a field I love, not to mention the priceless experience of making new friends.

Arriving at DC was relatively straightforward, although I found myself a bundle of nerves. To be completely honest, when I first heard about the symposium and the NSH Legislative Leadership Scholarship (via an email from the NSH), I was unsure of what to expect. Initially, I was drawn to the scholarship mostly because it had leadership in the title and I wanted to grow my career path. I figured worst comes to worst, I wouldn't get picked. Best case scenario, I'd have some resume fodder. My original relaxed view of the scholarship dissolved as I faced my first time traveling alone, and the very stark realization that I did not know anyone who would be attending, nor did I really know what was going to be asked of me. I worried I would be a little lost and lonely over the next two days. Overall, I felt in over my head, and unsure of what and why I had signed up for this.

The days that followed quelled my fears. First, I met my roommate and fellow scholarship recipient, Megan Binseil. We quickly bonded over our shared anxieties about the trip, as well as our passion for the field and hope for the experience. On Sunday night, we were both invited to a



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dinner with some members of the NSH. The dinner gave both Megan and I a chance to connect on a more personal level with each other as well as with Sharon Kneebone (NSH Executive Director), Diane Sterchi, (NSH President) and Amanda Kelley (NSH Legislative Chair). As I often experience when meeting with others from NSH, I was warmed by the feeling of belonging and kinship as we swapped backgrounds and stories, both personal and professional alike. In one evening, I felt like I knew these lovely ladies for years, and realized that loneliness would no longer be a concern in the next few days.

Even though I consider myself a somewhat informed citizen, I felt woefully unprepared to discuss real laboratory issues with actual staffers of Congress. Of course, none of the event organizers expected us to be experts, and held an all-day crash course on the subjects on Monday. They opened with an overview of the political situation, explained how acts are created and passed, and how we were to transform from laboratorians to lobbyists. Three issues were our main concern: Workplace shortages, the Protecting Access to Medicare Act (PAMA), and Laboratory Developed Tests (LDTs).

Like many other newer laboratory professionals I've met, my own educational experience had been challenged by lack of clinical sites. This common roadblock to employment compounds the ever growing workplace shortage as more and more laboratory professionals move towards retirement. This issue seems somewhat insurmountable at times, but the ASCLS has proposed a solution: the Allied Health Personnel Act. This bill would create more opportunities as it would allocate funding/scholarships towards allied health programs (specifically laboratory professions), as well as possibly partner with VA hospitals to open more clinical sites for education. Lastly, it's been recommended that yearly data is collected to make sure no particular region or profession is overlooked or underdeveloped. Personally, I was impressed with the comprehensive and cohesive way this bill would help combat the staffing issues that so many have felt the pains of.



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In addition to feeling the pains of limited education/clinical sites and staff shortages, in the past few years, I've heard about the medicare reimbursement rates dropping and that it was negatively affecting hospitals and laboratories around the country. That being said, I was unaware that the PAMA cuts were the result of an unfounded conclusion based on faulty data. To compound the issue, the reimbursement cuts are extensive and consecutive on a yearly basis. In turn, we asked our members of Congress to redress the situation by making a statutory adjustment to the Clinical Laboratory Fee Schedule (CLFS), collect more comprehensive and appropriate data that represents all facets of the laboratory market, and ultimately revise PAMA to better reflect payments in concordance to laboratory type, market share, and geography.

While workplace shortages and medicare cuts were somewhat familiar to me prior to the symposium, I was unaware about the potential difficulties regarding LDTs. These tests are currently defined by the FDA as in vitro diagnostic tests that are developed, manufactured and used within a single laboratory. As it stands, these tests are not regulated and the ASCLS has provided input on a proposal: Verifying Accurate Leading-edge IVCT Development Act of 2018 (VALID act). This act would lead to better regulation of LDTs, which in turn will verify and uphold testing to improve standards to ensure valid results and high-quality healthcare.



Monday's crash course helped me feel much more prepared for our Tuesday meetings. I also had the opportunity to connect with Lisa Shave, a MLT program director, as well as some of her students, from my state and district. Together, we collaborated on a plan and devised an unified front on the issues, and worked together to optimize our opportunities to meet with representatives. Regardless of the preparation, the current political climate primed me to brace for the staffers to say succinct thank you's and show us the door. To my surprise, all staffer we met were very cordial, shared in our concerns and really listened to our opportunities. Many had a



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personal experience or connection with healthcare and understood the gravity of the situation. I can honestly say, I believe we will continue a dialogue with our representatives, and hopefully, make a real identifiable difference with the progression of these acts.

If the education and meetings of the trip weren't enough, Tuesday offered an open afternoon which allowed Megan and I to take a detour to the Botanical Gardens and Capital Hill before our respective flights home. It was an appropriate conclusion to the experience, as we viewed science and politics in the epicenter of our nation. Ultimately, the trip was more than I could have ever dreamed. I made new friends, networked with others in my field, advocated for laboratories, and tackled new experiences. While I may have been unsure of the symposium at the start, I sincerely plan to return in future years. I want to continue to build a relationship with Congress, as well as my fellow laboratorians in NSH and other organizations. Even if it means suffering through another cold or two.