Michigan State University (MSU) College of Human Medicine has conducted four Project Medical Education programs over the past five years. In the era of term limits in the Michigan legislature and significant turnover within the Michigan congressional delegation, I see Project Medical Education as a valuable opportunity to provide state legislators and key congressional staff members with a hands-on experience, discovering for themselves the challenges faced by medical students, residents, and physicians in today's health care environment.

As a community-focused medical school, we rely on community hospital partners throughout Michigan to provide clinical experiences for our third- and fourth-year medical students. As a result, each of our Project Medical Education events has had a slightly different flavor working with our hospital partners in Lansing (Sparrow), Grand Rapids (Spectrum Health and the Van Andel Research Institute), and Marquette (Marquette General Health System). The participants have included state legislators and congressional district staff from each of those regions, as well as health and research congressional and committee staff from Washington, D.C.

That variety has enhanced our Project Medical Education programs, as it has allowed legislators and staff to see health care in a variety of settings, including urban and rural, and large teaching hospitals and smaller medical centers. In essence, the legislators and congressional staff received the same variation that our medical school students experience in their training.

As dean of the College of Human Medicine, I have the opportunity to meet with members of Congress and their staff in Washington and legislators in Lansing, but rather than just talking about the issues important to medical schools and hospitals, the interactive nature of Project Medical Education allows the legislators to experience health care firsthand and interact with our medical school students, residents, and our community hospital partners' patients.

In Marquette, the legislators and congressional staff experienced telemedicine for the first time and actually interacted with a patient 200 miles away along with that patient's physician. In Grand Rapids, they visited the state-of-the-art laboratories of the Van Andel Research Institute and interacted with researchers from the National Institutes of Health-funded Morris K. Udall Center of Excellence for Parkinson's disease at MSU. In Lansing, the participants practiced interview skills with our standardized patients in our clinical skills lab.

For many legislators and staff members, this was the first time they fully understood the relationship between medical education, residency training, and community hospitals – and the impact medical education has on access to health care and medical research. One of the participants, State Representative Roy Schmidt (D-Grand Rapids), summed it up best when he said, “Project Medical Education was an informative experience for me and has helped me immensely with health care policymaking decisions.”

As dean of the College of Human Medicine, I have the opportunity to meet with members of Congress, legislative representatives, and other participants. Even after my medical education journey experience, watching the day unfold made me more aware of the personal challenges and opportunities young physicians face today. Our Project Medical Education participants quickly sensed this; we were pleasantly surprised and impressed with the personal bonds forged between them and their physician-in-training colleagues.

Many aspects of the Maine Track program, including the financial challenges in medical education and the multiple steps required for professional training, were unfamiliar to our attendees.

“For doing and experiencing” were the key words of the day during our immersion into the lives of medical students and residents. A lively discussion in a problem-based learning session was followed by a simulation center activity: actively caring for a patient requiring emergency intubation. One-on-one clinical time with the residents offered participants varied experiences that ranged from patient consultations in the pediatric clinic and the special care unit, to interpreting radiology studies and attending a delivery in the family birthing center. The afternoon patient safety and quality conference allowed attendees to discuss patient outcomes and analyze their own critical thinking skills.

I would highly recommend [Project Medical Education] for any board member or medical ‘influencer’ – politician, foundation member or just those who always wanted to put on a white coat for the day!”

-Ruth Newlands Campbell, member of MMC’s Board of Trustees

For the leadership of Maine Medical Center (MMC), Project Medical Education presented a key opportunity to connect with our community and share the importance of the educational portion of our three-part mission. Attendees, including Maine state legislators, members of MMC’s Board of Trustees, and community leaders began the day in the classroom and were paired with a third-year Maine Track medical student for a presentation detailing the medical school partnership between MMC and Tufts University School of Medicine (TUSM). The Maine Track program is an innovative curriculum dedicated to rural practice built around Maine-based educational experiences. Many aspects of the Maine Track program, including the financial challenges in medical education and the multiple steps required for professional training, were unfamiliar to our attendees.

“Doing and experiencing” were the key words of the day during our immersion into the lives of medical students and residents. A lively discussion in a problem-based learning session was followed by a simulation center activity: actively caring for a patient requiring emergency intubation. One-on-one clinical time with the residents offered participants varied experiences that ranged from patient consultations in the pediatric clinic and the special care unit, to interpreting radiology studies and attending a delivery in the family birthing center. The afternoon patient safety and quality conference allowed attendees to discuss patient outcomes and analyze their own critical thinking skills.

A presentation at the Maine Medical Center Research Institute informed participants of recent advances in cancer research.

These students and residents clearly made an impression on members of our Board of Trustees, legislative representatives, and other participants. Even after my medical education journey experience, watching the day unfold made me more aware of the personal challenges and opportunities young physicians face today. Our Project Medical Education participants quickly sensed this; we were pleasantly surprised and impressed with the personal bonds forged between them and their physician-in-training colleagues.

We have been fortunate to attract outstanding individuals to our medical education programs, young people with impressive academic records who also embody the personal qualities we all want in the physicians and providers who care for us when we are sick and vulnerable. Project Medical Education was an important reminder of the value gained in connecting our complex academic health center with our extended community. The health care transformation currently under way will be led by our younger colleagues. If nothing else, Project Medical Education sustains hope with our participants for the future of health care.
Maine Medical Center and Tufts University School of Medicine hosted its first Project Medical Education program in October. Participants included five state legislators and six leaders representing the following Maine organizations: the Francis Hollis Brain Foundation, the Sam L. Cohen Foundation, Hannaford Brothers Supermarkets, the John T. Gorman Foundation, the Finance Authority of Maine, and Bank of America.

The one-day program highlighted the special public-private partnership in Maine through the Maine Medical Center/Tufts University School of Medicine Maine Track program, which provides Tufts medical students the opportunity to fulfill third- and fourth-year clinical requirements in Maine. This pipeline-building program’s goal is to increase the number of Maine doctors by recruiting a majority of Maine natives into the program.

The Project Medical Education program matched attendees one-to-one with a student for the morning sessions where they experienced an interactive problem-based learning exercise, saved a “patient” during a simulation scenario, and collected advice on how to finance a steep tuition bill.

The afternoon focused on graduate medical education, with participants spending individual clinical time with residents to better understand their roles and work. The day concluded with a research session at the Maine Medical Center Research Institute where participants learned about a cancer research study, viewed an MRI machine for mice, and practiced pipetting a biomedical assay to simulate one being done for cancer tumor marker detection.