

Top Ten Tips for Calling Your Members of Congress and Their Staff

Calling the offices of Members of Congress is one of the easiest and most effective ways for those in the dermatology nursing community to communicate with policymakers on issues of interest and priority. Such a phone call, if done correctly, can result in garnering support from Members.

To reach the offices of your two Senators and your Representative in the House, just call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121, and ask to be transferred to their offices. If you are not sure who represents you, just visit www.senate.gov and www.house.gov to learn your policymakers' names or you may also ask the Capitol Hill Operator to assist you.

Be sure to keep a record of the date and time of your call(s), and the person with whom you spoke or for whom you left a message.

In preparation for the call, be sure to spend some time on the advocacy section of the DNA website to learn more about specific legislation and "asks."

Top Ten Tips

- 1. Once connected with your elected official's office, identify yourself as a constituent to the receptionist.** Clearly state your first and last name, your hometown, and why you are calling. If you know who the health legislative assistant is, be sure to ask for that staffer by name. If not, ask for the staffer's name, and request to be transferred. Sometimes, the receptionist will indicate that you will need to leave your comments with him/her. If that is the case, you still should ask for the name of the health legislative assistant, so that you have that information on record for future reference.
- 2. If transferred to the health legislative assistant**, or if you are put into the staffer's voicemail, reintroduce yourself and immediately identify the topic you wish to discuss. If you are instructed to leave a message with the receptionist, repeat your name and continue with the message that you wish to deliver.
- 3. Make a few brief points** as to why the issue is of concern to you, your community, and the nation, and why the Member should take action. You may want to use written notes to help you stay on topic and remain clear while articulating your case.
- 4. Be clear as to what you are asking the Member to do** (e.g., cosponsor a particular bill, vote for or against a specific measure, sign a "Dear Colleague" letter). Additional information on specific issues and actions is outlined in the advocacy priorities section of the DNA website.
- 5. Be polite in your tone and language.** The staffer on the other end of the phone is overworked, overwhelmed, and receives dozens – if not hundreds – of calls a day. In fact, in some offices, you may be speaking with a junior staffer or a college intern, so be sure to be patient and forgiving. Also, be sure not to use any "lingo" or "slang." You should not assume the person on the other end of the phone is familiar with the issue you are discussing so be as clear and concise as possible.
- 6. Keep it brief.** Limit your call to no more than five minutes, unless the staffer asks you questions and seems engaged in the discussion. Offer to send additional or follow-up information to the staffer, and request their preferred mode of communication (e.g. e-mail, fax, telephone).

- 7. Specifically request a written response** from the office on the Member's position or action on the issue you addressed.
- 8. Provide your full name**, mailing address, e-mail address, and telephone number.
- 9. Thank the staffer** for his/her time, and indicate that you appreciate his/her willingness to listen and record your comments. Be sure to record the name of the staffer and the day and time you spoke, so you can have it for future use and in case you need to follow up.
- 10. If you do not receive a response within a reasonable timeframe** (approximately a month), either call or write to follow-up and request a response. Reference your phone call, and mention with whom you spoke and the topic to help facilitate a meaningful reply.

Other Tips

If you receive the voicemail for a staffer or the office, be sure to leave a brief, clear message for the staffer (noting his/her name down for future reference) – providing your full name, contact information, and the nature of your call and specific request; be clear that you would like a return call and/or a letter from the Member on the topic about which you are calling.

Be sure to keep in touch with the offices of your Members of Congress to establish a relationship, and make yourself available as a local resource on dermatology and/or nursing-related issues. There are times when you and an elected official will have to "agree to disagree," but over time, you also may find that the policymaker may be supportive and helpful on other matters.

Sample Phone Call

Hello. My name is Mary Smith and I am a constituent from Boston, Massachusetts. May I speak with the health legislative assistant that handles health care issues?

If transferred to the health legislative assistant, repeat your introduction and then deliver your message. If the receptionist indicates you are to leave a message with him or her, ask for the name of the health legislative assistant for future reference and deliver your message.

Again, my name is Mary Smith and I am a dermatology nurse living and working in Boston, Massachusetts. I am calling today because I am very concerned about ensuring my patients' access to needed phototherapy services. The 2014 proposed Medicare fee schedule includes a proposed cut to reimbursement for dermatology-related phototherapy services. As proposed, the cut would reduce reimbursements by up to 50 to 60 percent. Cuts to phototherapy services will reduce our ability to treat patients with serious skin diseases, such as psoriasis, vitiligo, cutaneous lymphoma, and eczema.

One of the most effective treatments for some skin diseases is phototherapy, which is usually done in a physician office setting and which exposes patients to safe levels of UV light. This is not tanning; it is done by prescription. A patient need to have this done more than once a week, so copayments can add up. Changes to Medicare reimbursement to these services would add another burden to patient access.

Insert a personal story about your experience as a nurse that supports the ask (being mindful of HIPPA, of course).

I hope that your boss will take a few minutes to weigh in with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services in order to ensure that patients with these painful and sometimes debilitating skin conditions can continue the treatment needed to allow them to lead full, productive lives.

I would like a written response indicating the Congressman's position. My address is 1234 Main Street, Boston, MA 09876. Thank you very much for your time and attention to my request, and please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any question; my phone number is (789) 456-1230. I look forward to hearing from your boss.