CONTENTS
Introduction ............................................................................. 2
You can make a difference ..................................................... 4
Grassroots advocacy ............................................................... 6
Useful websites ........................................................................ 8
Communicating with your MP .................................................. 9
  Meeting face-to-face .......................................................... 10
  Telephoning your MP’s office .............................................. 12
  Writing letters ..................................................................... 13
  Building a relationship with your MP ................................... 16
Conclusion .............................................................................. 17

Helping doctors help Canadians.
INTRODUCTION

Members of Parliament (MPs) want to be kept informed of issues in their ridings.

Your MP is interested in having a reliable expert source on health and health care. Only through ongoing communication will MPs know and understand health issues affecting their constituencies. This handbook has been designed to help you, as a member of the MD–MP Contact Program, to make the most of your time and effort.

The purpose of the MD–MP Contact Program is to promote countrywide grassroots lobbying by physicians. It is your participation that will help determine the MD–MP Contact Program’s success. Along with hundreds of other physicians across the country, you play an important role in transforming Canada’s health care system.

As a member of the MD–MP Contact Program, you are the voice of the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) when you speak to MPs one-on-one at the local level.

We encourage you to use this handbook as a convenient reference. The methods described in the following pages — in combination with other MD–MP Contact Program information you will receive — will ensure that you are fully equipped to play a role in the public policy process.

The MD–MP Contact Program further helps its members by providing background information, talking points, strategic advocacy plans and advocacy training workshops.

For assistance in your efforts, you are encouraged to contact the CMA at 800-682-MDMP (6367) or by email at grassroots@cma.ca.
YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Your MP was elected to represent you. If you want health care views represented in the House of Commons, you must first make sure your MP knows where the CMA stands.

MPs want to respond to the needs of their constituents. Therefore, they have an interest in listening to those who are willing to take the time to express their views, especially on an issue as important as health care.

Members of Parliament want to hear from their constituents. Several recent surveys found that political offices rate personal communications from constituents as having the most clout.

Personal contact is the most effective form of communication. In fact, the best way to get the attention of an MP or their staff is for you to contact the office personally.

As a member of the MD–MP Contact Program, you can have a powerful voice in shaping policy and legislation. We realize physicians are focused on their practices and their patients, but by taking the time to participate in the MD–MP Contact Program, you can help shape tomorrow’s health care system. As a physician, your role as a community leader and a member of a trusted profession gives you an advantage in advocacy.

The CMA through the MD–MP Contact Program wants to work with you to improve the delivery of health care to Canadians.
Learn about the MP who represents you. Through the MD–MP Contact Program, members can obtain information about their MPs: who they are, what committees they sit on, issues they have raised in the House of Commons, their voting record and how to contact them. We can also provide some basic background information about your MP.

Once you have established a relationship with your MP, it is important to report back to the CMA on the progress of your advocacy efforts by contacting the MD–MP Contact Program.

FIVE EASY STEPS TO BECOMING AN ACTIVE MD–MP MEMBER

1. Contact CMA’s MD–MP Contact Program by phone or email.
2. Learn more about your MP.
3. Build a relationship with MP and staff; keep in contact.
4. Advise your MP on health care issues.
5. Let the CMA know about your activities.

GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY

Focusing on basics is critical to effective advocacy. You have already taken the first step — becoming a member of the MD–MP Contact Program. Learn about the health care issues that affect you and your patients. As a member of the MD–MP Contact Program, you have access to current health care information, and we will continually update you through InfoCapsule, the monthly newsletter, briefs, and talking points.

Next, be sure to have local examples handy. MPs are always concerned about the health of their constituents especially since health care is an important issue for Canadians. Therefore, personal local experiences can be powerful. For example, what issue regularly affects your patients? Including this kind of information in your communications with your MP can greatly increase your message’s impact.
If you want your MP to represent the views of physicians, you must first let your MP know where physicians stand.

As important as it is to develop a relationship with your MP, it is equally important that you get to know the MP’s staff. In most instances, you will deal directly with the MP’s staff. The MP often relies heavily on them for their knowledge and expertise. This is especially true if your MP is also a cabinet minister.
MEETING FACE-TO-FACE

A face-to-face meeting with your MP is the best way to present your views. Although it may be difficult to arrange a meeting, it is always worth the effort.

The MD–MP Contact Program can assist you in arranging a meeting with your MP or you can call the constituency office yourself. Keep in mind your MP is in Ottawa when the House is in session, however. Be sure to tell the scheduling assistant you are a constituent and explain the nature of your meeting.

If you are inviting your MP to attend an event, it is best to send a written invitation and follow up by telephone a few days later. All letters should be addressed to the constituency office.

Arranging a meeting is only the first step. If you want the meeting to be successful you must be fully prepared. Take the time to familiarize yourself with the issues affecting health care, both in your area and nationally.

HINTS FOR HOLDING A PRODUCTIVE MEETING

Contact the MD–MP Contact Program for the latest CMA talking points on current issues or relevant information about your MP.

ELEMENTS OF A PRODUCTIVE MEETING

- **PLANNED:** Prepare an agenda which includes your specific concerns and what you want the MP to do.
- **FOCUSED:** Prepare up to three key messages.
- **RELEVANT:** How does your issue relate not only to your MP, but also to the constituents?
- **PURPOSEFUL:** It helps to have a clear and concise call to action or purpose, to understand national and local perspectives and to be prepared to answer questions.
TELEPHONING YOUR MP’S OFFICE

Telephone calls are useful when you want to discuss health care issues with your MP or find out where he/she stands on an issue.

Usually you will speak with a member of your MP’s staff. Remember this person represents your MP and is authorized to speak on behalf of your MP on most issues.

If you must speak with your MP rather than the staff, ask that he/she call you back, preferably at the end of the day. This is more likely to happen if you have already developed a relationship.

WRITING LETTERS

MPs and their staff pay close attention to their mail — especially mail from constituents.

Taking the time to share your ideas and opinions on an issue in a thoughtful, well-written letter will be both appreciated and noted by your MP.

Four things to keep in mind as you write:

- keep it local
- keep it personal
- keep it concise
- keep it on message

Write on personal or business stationery: Include a return address — envelopes are often discarded.

Make it brief: No more than a single side of one page. Discuss one subject per letter — do not dilute the importance of your main point.
Be constructive: If a proposed bill or policy takes the wrong approach, suggest an alternative.

Send the MD–MP Contact Program a copy of your letter:
We always enjoy hearing from our members on their activities.

All MPs have the same address:

(Name of MP), MP
House of Commons
Ottawa ON K1A 0A6

IF YOU GET A NON-COMMITTAL RESPONSE ...
Do not be surprised if the reply is non-committal. Often, an MP will not take a position on an issue until the last minute.
A neutral position is the easiest posture for an MP to assume as it requires no research and no thought, and alienates the fewest voters. Thus, your best strategy is to educate your MP on the implications of the legislation or policy and how it will affect you.

Write back if the reply did not answer your questions, was ambiguous or evaded the question by claiming that the fate of the bill is in someone else’s hands, such as a committee on which that MP does not sit. That may be true, but your MP should still tell you where he/she stands.

In your brief follow-up letter or phone call, make two or three good points and restate your position. Remind your MP that you are following the issue.

IF YOU DISAGREE WITH YOUR MP’S POSITION ...
Your follow-up letter should:

- Express thanks for the response.
- Express your disagreement, refute your MP’s arguments and make a new point if needed.
- Ask a question or two that will force your MP to think about the issue and respond.
- Again, remind your MP that you are following the issue.

Be constructive: If a proposed bill or policy takes the wrong approach, suggest an alternative.

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BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR MP

Your MP needs an expert source of information on health care. We encourage you to establish a personal relationship with your MP. Should you wish to be more involved in politics, there are a few things you can do.

If your MP has his/her own health care advisory committee, offer to serve on it. If your MP is organizing a town hall meeting for constituents, offer to serve as a source of expert information on the health care system. Attend events organized by your MP.

Offer to serve on your MP’s riding association executive where you could become involved in fundraising and election readiness.

The more involved you are, the more your MP will come to rely on you as a reliable source of information.

CONCLUSION

As a member of the MD–MP Contact Program, you are joining the CMA’s efforts to be the national advocate, in partnership with the people of Canada, for the highest standards of health and health care. When physicians speak with one voice they cannot be ignored and their concerns will be taken seriously. The MD–MP Contact Program provides the vehicle through which our voices can be heard.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE MD–MP CONTACT PROGRAM

visit the web site: cma.ca
or contact: grassroots@cma.ca
800-682-6367