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A Seat at the Table

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To the Editor: I often ask 2 questions when meeting fellow trainees at the academic hospital where I work: What do you love most about your job, and what would you change if you were in charge? I ask to invite discussion about the structural failures of our health care system and to imagine how things could be better. These conversations serve a larger purpose—When issues repeatedly surface as being widely and deeply felt among trainees, they become issues that our union, the Committee of Interns and Residents, can collectively organize behind.

Labor unions are not new to health care; physicians gained the right to unionize under the 1935 National Labor Relations Act. Yet only a small minority of all practicing physicians in the U.S. belong to a union.¹ This is a problem, especially as physician burnout rates surge during the COVID-19 pandemic. Physicians have less control over their work schedules and fewer ways to advocate for themselves and patients in the workplace. Physician unions can collectively organize to advocate for improved patient care and safety, protection from unsafe working conditions, and for more fair compensation and benefits. Some physicians’ dedication to patient care makes them hesitant to self-advocate, but this is a false dichotomy: Health care unions are also associated with better patient outcomes.² During the COVID-19 pandemic, New York health care workers in unionized nursing homes had greater access to personal protective equipment than those in non-unionized nursing homes, and patients had a 30% lower risk of dying.³ Unions operate on a simple principle: Those who are working hard to make institutions run should have a say in deciding how it operates. In hospitals, that includes trainees who continue to face demanding work hours and limited control over their schedules, all while fighting a pandemic that has claimed over 700,000 American lives. Now more than ever it is important for medical trainees to organize, because as the adage goes, “If you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu.”
References

