

WHY LETTERS TO THE EDITOR (LTEs) ARE IMPORTANT

AND WHY LTEs BY DOCTORS ARE VITALLY IMPORTANT

→ Do you feel strongly about how Medicaid, substance use disorder, poverty and other social determinants of health, opioid prescribing, and new clinical research findings affect your patients, their families, and the overall health of your community?

→ Do you get frustrated, even angry, about certain health care public policies, regulations, and proposed laws that are not in the best interest of your patients?

→ Do you want to reach an audience larger than just your friends and colleagues and motivate them to act on issues such as trauma-informed health care, the neuroscience of addiction, Medicaid expansion, gun violence, a compelling story about one of your patients, or a counter-productive health care policy?

Doctors for America (DFA), with support from the Conrad H. Hilton Foundation, offers this concise guide on best practices that physicians can use to write effective, persuasive letters to the editor (LTEs). DFA members and other doctors bring a heightened sense of gravitas and expertise to the public discourse and decision-making process. Your letters influence public opinion which, in turn, influences elected officials, policymakers, editorial boards, and community leaders.

In the age of social media and its many platforms, it's easy to dismiss LTEs as an outdated form of advocacy and communication. It's important, however, to remember that LTEs are the most widely-read features in any newspaper or magazine. LTEs shape public opinion and having "M.D." after the signer's name increases the likelihood of publication. LTEs create awareness of issues, people (patients), and ideas that you care about.

SOME TIPS FOR WRITING A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Before starting to write, think through the reasons you want to write and submit your letter. These might include:

- You want to correct information or comment on information in an item in that publication.
- You are angry about an issue, recent news article, or detrimental health care practice or policy.
- You want to publicly acknowledge/congratulate a person, e.g. a colleague.
- You want people to act, become involved on an issue and/or participate in an event.
- You want to share a story about one of your patients (respecting confidentiality) that pertains to a current issue or policy.
- You want to influence elected officials and other policymakers.

Once you've decided to write an LTE, there are a few general guidelines worth adhering to. Most newspapers and publications have their own guidelines, e.g. you must include your work and home contact information (it won't be published, just a way of verifying that you're the author); word limits (usually 200-300 words with some flexibility); allowable number of published letters from the same author (no more than one every ninety days); confirmation that you haven't submitted the same letter to other publications, blogs, and websites; and other rules.

If your letter is in response to a specific article, it should be mailed within two to three days of when the article appeared. The editors' rationale is that the original article is more likely to still be in their readers' minds. Cite the article specifically, both in the "Subject" line of your e-mail and in the body of your letter, for example, ("Medication-assisted Treatment is the Effective for Treating People in Addiction," Aug. 8).

Most publications prefer to receive your letter by e-mail rather than snail mail or fax. E-mail speeds up the process; makes less work for the editor; and enhances your chances of being published. No need to worry about the salutation of your letter. Just follow the style of the publication you're writing to, e.g. "To The Editor" or "Dear Editor."

It's helpful to read others LTEs that already have been published in the newspaper to which you're submitting. That will provide you with the styles, lengths that the editors consider publishable. Additionally, there are other tips for getting published.

- Your opening sentence is very important. Editors and readers need to know up front what issue or article you're writing about. Be concise and use language that an ordinary reader (non-doctor) can understand. Avoid any abbreviations or acronyms; spell them all out and explain what they mean and why they're germane to your letter. Make your main point(s) early and explain why the topic is important for the readers, your community, and you as a doctor.
- To buttress your point/argument, provide some evidence. It could be from new research, new data about your community, e.g. the number of fatal drug overdoses that show fentanyl, survey results, information from Doctors for America, other statistics, or your own personal story as a physician. The latter is especially relevant as readers often relate to a compelling story.
- Keeping in mind that brevity may be the key to getting published, start the closing of your LTE by telling people what they can do, what actions they might consider to address the issue, help rectify the problem, gain more awareness about the issue, e.g. "attend our upcoming community meeting on youth substance abuse at our health fair," or where to find more information. You might direct them to a certain website or cite other sources of information. Gently tell the readers what they can do: sign a petition; contact their local, state, and federal elected officials; volunteer or support community organizations that address the topic of your letter.

- Have a one-sentence last paragraph that is a powerful closing statement. Re-emphasize your opening point and provide a sense of urgency or importance to the issue, e.g. “Unless we implement some evidence-based youth drug prevention programs immediately, our community will continue to see more and younger children overdosing, and in many cases, dying.”
- Your signing at the end of your letter should include the “M.D.” after your name and any other affiliation, e.g. “Doctor Poppen is a Neurologist and member of Doctors for America.”

The next section of this guide has examples of “swiss cheese” LTEs, which are customizable draft letters that convey a consistent message while allowing tailoring to individual physician experience.