

How I learned to write an Op-Ed

by Sabrina Eliason MD FRCPC (Developmental Pediatrics)



I paused, reading over my email to Dr. Danielle Martin one more time before I pressed "send". I had read her book "Better Now" (1) about the Canadian Health Care System. I had watched her in the news (2) when she appeared before a US Senate Committee Hearing to educate American policymakers about publicly funded health care. I had read her academic work (3) defending universal access to health care.

Here I was, a female physician less than one year into practice on maternity leave and at home with two young children during a pandemic. I was feeling angry and frustrated about provincial government reforms that would threaten the long-term health of my patients - but what could I do?

The parents I met at the playgrounds didn't seem to share my sentiments. The message they were hearing (and believing) was: "Doctors are greedy". The well-informed discussions and articles written by my physician colleagues about the negative effects of the health reforms were not reaching the non-medical people in my community. I felt like someone needed to help inform the public that these reforms would threaten the well-being of our most vulnerable populations, widen the gap of social inequality and ultimately be harmful to the long-term health and economy of our province. There needed to be a way to tell the public how these reforms would affect them. Perhaps the messaging was missing a certain level of personal connection. Dr. Martin was a Canadian family physician who had a track-record of being an advocate for public health care. Could she provide some advice on what I could do?

As I watched the "draft" disappear into my "sent" folder, I wondered if she would reply.

Later that day, Dr. Martin wrote back:

"I suggest you try writing an Op-Ed for the newspaper on the issue you think the public should be most upset about, why, and what can be done about it. It should be no more than 750 words and written for lay people. Try opening with a brief story from your personal experience as a clinician - to put a face on the issue. Then bring some data and evidence about the issue, then your recommendations."

I asked out loud to myself, "What's an Op-Ed?"

Op-Eds, or "Opinion-Editorials," are submissions that are written to express the opinion of an author who is not a regular member of the editorial board of a publication. They are a way of democratizing cultural and political discourse; stimulating new thought and provoking timely conversation about public issues. (4) Even in the age of social media, a compelling Op-Ed can be a way of communicating expertise to a larger and broader audience than those who "follow" the same social networks and "like" the same points of view.

I started typing my thoughts and citing references that backed up every argument. I went back and read Op-Eds that had been published in the local newspapers. There was never a bibliography. These writers were convincing the readership of their expertise through their writing alone. That made me feel uncomfortable - would my writing be strong enough? I saved one copy of my Op-Ed citing everything and another copy citing nothing.

After sending her my final draft, Dr. Martin wrote back with advice on what to do next:

"I suggest sending it in to whichever newspaper has the highest circulation in (the province)... Once it is published, you should spend a few hours sending a personal email to every MLA in the province explaining who you are, why you are so upset, and attach the Op-Ed. Ask them to reply and tell you what they are doing to respond to your concerns."

I edited my piece again and sent my Op-Ed to the local newspaper. Less than 5 minutes after I sent it, the Editor informed me that my piece was being considered for publication. I waited. After a week, just as I was planning on where to submit to next, I was notified that my submission would be in the next day's paper. When I woke up the next day, my Op-Ed was being posted, shared, "reacted to" and "tweeted". Words I had written were sitting on doorsteps across the province waiting to be read. Over the following week, I wrote to every MLA and started a dialogue with each one who responded.

This process of writing my first Op-Ed highlighted the potential that exists in connection, camaraderie and mentorship in the medical profession across specialties and non-specialties. I'm thankful for Dr. Martin's mentorship. Through our few emails back and forth I've learned about this new (to me) form of writing that will hopefully continue to enable me to advocate for my patients. I hope others who read this story can learn from her advice as well.

This process also taught me that Op-Eds are an effective way of communicating expertise, and engaging the public. Op-Eds provide an approachable way to stimulate meaningful discussion, connection and thought amongst a wide reach of people. During this time of fear and false information, society needs more thoughtful, kind and informed people to discover the strength in their writing. Sometimes the biggest barrier to sharing an expert opinion, is a lack of courage rather than a lack of knowledge. I hope that this story about my journey of learning to write my first Op-Ed gives the courage to others to start their own journey.

Thank you to Dr. Danielle Martin for your mentorship, for giving me permission to write this and, once again, for reviewing this piece for me.

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