Chris Clifford goes to Washington:
Health policy advocacy with the AMA

by JAMES RUTTER, Class of 2017

At universities across the country, students engage in internships, fellowships and various other career-development programs. But few of them have the opportunity to live in the nation’s capital for a year, fighting to make a positive impact in people’s lives.

That is exactly what University of Nevada, Reno School of Medicine student Christopher Clifford ’13 (biochemistry and molecular biology) will do this academic year as the American Medical Association’s (AMA) Government Relations Advocacy Fellow (GRAF).

The Reno native became interested in the GRAF program after attending an AMA medical student conference. “One of the speakers at the conference shared the story of his fellowship: ‘I’m the Government Relations Advocacy Fellow, I’m taking a year off from med school to work in Washington with the lobbyists on health policy,’” Clifford said. “From that opening line alone, I fell in love with the position.”

The goal of the fellowship is to encourage activism and leadership by educating student, resident and young AMA members about issues in public health and health policy.

Clifford believes the experience will be invaluable to him as a future physician because of the changing nature of health care. “I really want to expand my knowledge about the interplay between health care and government, because health care is really kind of turning into a government-controlled entity. Education needs to start at the student level, which it currently doesn’t. It’s up to us to fill that knowledge gap,” he said.

In addition to the career benefits the position offers, Clifford sees a unique opportunity to help others through his work. “It’s really cool to be a part of
writing or pushing for a bill or policy that has the potential to help millions of people,” Clifford said. “Look at the Affordable Care Act: A lot of people have opinions about it, but the fact is, it increased access to physicians for millions of Americans.”

Clifford recently had the opportunity to help make such an impact by working on an advocacy campaign to get funding for the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act (CARA). He organized a week of events for students to advocate for the bill’s funding, ending with their contacting congressional representatives. “The bill helps with the opioid epidemic, which is something that skews toward a younger demographic, and a lot of these students feel passionately about it,” Clifford said.

Clifford’s supervisor at the AMA, George Cox, believes he has done well working on advocacy efforts like the CARA. “He’s brought natural talent to engage with our advocacy staff and assist in our advocacy efforts,” Cox said.

Cox explained that since starting the fellowship in June 2016, Clifford has traveled around the U.S. as part of the AMA’s Succeeding in Medical School program. “Chris gets to travel to multiple medical schools and give presentations about how to succeed in medical school and why it’s important not just to know about medicine, but also about health policy issues. By all accounts, he’s been very successful in those school meetings,” Cox said.

According Cherie Singer ‘93 (biology), associate dean for admissions and student affairs at the University of Nevada, Reno School of Medicine, Clifford’s active interest in policy has been a defining characteristic since starting at the University. “Since his first year of medical school, Chris has been incredibly active,” Singer said. “He was the student representative to the American Medical Association in his first year, and he really started showing an interest in policy and helping people early on.”

Prior to accepting the fellowship, Clifford revived the school’s AMA chapter and became a student representative for the Nevada State Medical Association and the Washoe County Medical Society. Cox felt that Clifford’s passion and experience clearly differentiated him from the other candidates who applied for the fellowship.

“He was the perfect candidate because he’d already shown not just the interest, but a strong motivation to engage in advocacy activity,” Cox said.

The University of Nevada, Reno School of Medicine is the only medical school to have had two GRAFs come from its program. The other was Patrick Woodard ’11 M.D., who participated in the program from 2008-09. “The fact that we are the only school to have had two students get accepted to the GRAF program is very telling – it shows we attract high-quality students who are really engaged in their community and passionate about the causes they believe in. Chris clearly exemplifies that,” Singer said.

As Clifford looks to the future, he sees himself returning to Reno to finish his medical education and then become a local practicing physician. He says someday he would love to be working for a nonprofit medical aid group like Doctors Without Borders or the Flying Doctors of America.

Regardless of where his career takes him, one thing is clear: Clifford will continue to take an active interest in the policies affecting health care and the people who need it. “The reason I got into medicine in the first place was to help people. I want to increase access to health care for as many people as I can, and I believe that policy has the potential to do the most good.”

“... It’s really cool to be a part of writing or pushing for a bill or policy that has the potential to help millions of people.

CHRISTOPHER CLIFFORD ’13
(biochemistry and molecular biology)