Students at the College of Medicine learn that it’s not enough to just uncover new knowledge about public health. Here, they need to take the findings to a public forum that will help bring about needed reforms.

The State of Vermont is unique in many ways; but from the perspective of a medical student, one of the key aspects of that uniqueness must be the ability to effect change so early in one’s medical career. This situation was demonstrated this winter by one group of second-year UVM medical students who completed their collective research on an important topic of environmental health, and within days presented their findings in testimony before the Vermont House of Representatives’ Committee on Natural Resources and Energy.

College of Medicine Class of 2012 members Melissa Marotta and Brett Porter spoke to the committee at the State House in Montpelier on January 22 in support of Bill H-97, which proposes to prohibit a heavyweight vehicle from idling while stopped for more than five consecutive minutes in any 60-minute period.

Marotta and Porter are two of seven members of a Medical Student Leadership Group that conducted a survey last fall to determine whether Vermont diesel vehicle operators were aware of the health effects of diesel exhaust and whether or not they were concerned about it. The group’s public health project, titled “Assessing Health Concerns and Obstacles to Diesel Exposure Reduction in Vermont Diesel Vehicle Operators,” was completed in conjunction with the American Lung Association of Vermont. Additional group members include Renee Bratnich, Maria Farman, Joseph Yared, Will Timbers, and Quillan Huang. Gerald Davis, M.D., UVM professor of medicine and Vermont Lung Center member, and Jan Carney, M.D., M.P.H., associate dean for public health, served as the group’s faculty co-mentors.

Seventy-five percent of drivers reported that they have not been educated about the health effects of diesel exposure.
With a long-term goal of identifying the best methods for reducing diesel idling in Vermont, the students’ study sought to determine several things: whether or not Vermont diesel vehicle drivers have been educated about exhaust exposure; if these drivers are concerned about potential health effects of diesel; the level of the drivers’ satisfaction with their understanding of the health impact of diesel fuel; and what these drivers found to be obstacles to idling reduction.

The group targeted Vermont businesses that employed a diesel fleet of more than ten drivers and lacked a no-idling policy. During November and December of 2009, surveys were administered to drivers who worked at seven diesel fleets in the Burlington and Rutland areas. Drivers surveyed ranged in age from 24 to 67 years.

The students found that two-thirds of the drivers who completed surveys reported that they would “almost always” or “always” follow employer-set policies if they were in place and 75 percent of drivers reported that they had not been educated about the potential health effects of diesel exposure. Only 15 percent indicated that they were “very satisfied” with their understanding of this issue.

Slightly more than two-thirds of drivers reported extensive idling in order “to keep myself warm or cool.” Only 5 percent reported idling their rigs in order to keep their truck’s contents warm or cool.

“While our sample does not report an overwhelming concern about health effects of diesel exposure,” say the project’s authors, “this may be a function of limited education, so driver education may be an effective target for idling reduction.” The students also believe that physician advocacy could assist in improving drivers’ education as well as reducing idling, as drivers by a wide margin report their doctors are their prime trusted source of health information.

The legislative committee members complemented the medical students on their informative testimony. Bill H.97 was later forwarded to the House Transportation Committee for further action this spring.

In 1905, when the College of Medicine completed its third home at the corner of Prospect and Pearl streets in Burlington, the main lecture room was named Hall A. For the next 63 years, students such as the members of the Class of 1955 (shown above listening to the legendary Prof. Ellsworth Amidon, M.D.’32) spent much of their time in the hall. Today’s students take in lectures in the Sullivan Classroom or in the recently renovated Carpenter Auditorium, but the College’s educational mission of inspiring a lifetime of learning in the service of the patient remains the same. The Hall A magazine section is a meeting place in print for all former students of the College of Medicine.