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**COMMENTARY**

## Physiatrist Volunteerism in Specialty Societies and Organized Medicine

**ABSTRACT**

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**W**hy should a physiatrist volunteer to join a professional organization, and what can one do to enhance his or her ability to rise to a leadership position? Professional associations are groups of people who share a common background in a particular career area. These organizations are typically nonprofit, cooperative, and voluntary, and they exist to serve their members in a variety of ways, such as by providing professional development activities, analyzing public policy, setting professional standards, sponsoring networking and social events, and providing career services. They also compile and disseminate information about the field, and they may lobby for legislation that is sympathetic to their particular cause.<sup>1</sup> Physicians are members of a variety of communities—professional, social, local, regional, national, and global—and each physician bears a primary ethical and professional responsibility for the health of the community members they serve.<sup>2</sup>

Some professional medical associations operate with state-sanctioned authority, but this may be revoked and replaced with governmental controls if society becomes dissatisfied with their performance.<sup>2–4</sup> The collegiality that these associations foster helps to establish common goals and encourages compliance with them. Self-regulation is the norm, as is the expectation that these associations will advise the public as experts in their domain. Medical associations have a primary role in strengthening the quality of healthcare services, but they also have an obligation to protect the interests of their individual members. These two roles can sometimes conflict with one another, and professional associations have not always managed such conflicts wisely, sometimes being perceived as subordinating the public's interest to their own. This has contributed to a loss of trust in physicians.<sup>3</sup> However, the control of the profession of medicine seems to be shifting from the profession to the state and to the corporate sector. Physicians must assume greater responsibility for their national medical associations. When associations fail to adequately represent them, then the societies, officers, or management must be replaced with ones who will do so effectively.

The extent to which professional medical associations should attempt to protect the economic interests of their members or represent their members in

negotiations with government regulators, insurers, and other third parties is debatable, but some such activity may well be unavoidable. There is a fine line between a professional association and a trade union. However, associations should be aware of the danger of focusing too much attention on the economic concerns of their members at the expense of their many—and more important—public and professional responsibilities. To increase the likelihood that the legitimate concerns of the public will receive the attention they deserve, it is the author's belief that all of our professional medical societies should have public members.

Professional associations should try to improve the performance of their physician members, foster professionalism, and provide mutual professional support for their colleagues.<sup>5</sup> Associations should help to advance medical knowledge, and they should be leaders in improving the quality of health care within their discipline.

Strong competition has developed over the issue of quality of medical care, a topic long monopolized by medical organizations through their control of education, training, and credentialing of physicians. Quality is now seen as a legitimate concern for purchasers, employees, managed care plans, provider organizations, politicians, and consumers, and it is the subject of serious measurement and reporting efforts under a variety of auspices. If physicians and their organizations do not take a proactive leadership position in the debates over high quality, cost-efficiency, and access to care, others will make the decisions for them.<sup>3</sup>

### **Reasons Why You Should Play An Active Role in a Professional Medical Association<sup>1</sup>**

1. **Access opportunities to meet and network with people in your field of interest.** By attending meetings, volunteering, and collaborating with other members, you build a powerful network of professionals in your specialty that can serve as a source of potential mentors.
2. **Have a built-in support group.** You gain access to a group of professionals with a shared background and perspective that can provide you with valuable support, resources, and education.
3. **Get up to speed in your field of interest.** Professional associations provide many opportunities to learn about trends in your area of interest. Many medical associations sponsor conferences and workshops, publish newsletters, journals, and magazines, have articles on their Web sites, and host Web-based discussion groups that can provide information on new and emerging trends. These activities will provide you with valuable

ideas and benchmarks for assessing and improving your own performance.

4. **Find out about job and training opportunities.** Professional associations share their job listings through their publications. Many have Web site access for members only for jobs and training openings.
5. **Stand out in the crowd and show your commitment to your specialty.** Many of your colleagues do not join or are unaware of the benefits of professional associations; by joining one, you show that you are motivated, committed, and genuinely interested in the specialty.
6. **Strengthen your leadership, presentation, and communication skills.** By volunteering to be on a committee, or by serving in a leadership position, you learn from seasoned professionals, and master the art of communicating in a less stressful environment with colleagues who are usually supportive and encouraging.

### **Some Keys to Successful Participation and Advancement Within Professional Organizations**

Volunteer to serve on a committee(s). All organizations are looking for new energetic members who are willing to participate. Always be prepared, and carefully read the material before the committee meeting. Volunteer for committee projects, and be sure to deliver a quality product on time. Dependable committee members are appreciated and are often chosen for more responsible organizational duties, including the committee chair. Do not commit to too many committees, projects, or organizations. Concentrate on those organization(s) and committees that meet your personal interests, time constraints, and goals. Remember, if you fail to deliver or are ill prepared to participate, that unfavorable reputation may follow you for years in the future. A good initial approach is to listen carefully and to speak only when you can clarify or add to the issue.

To become an officer of the organization, you need to prove yourself through years of effective service within the committee and task-force structure. My advice is to develop a very specific agenda of what you desire to accomplish for the organization during your term as an officer. The reputation you develop as a goal-directed officer within a professional organization can "open doors" within organized medicine and into other associations that you may wish to enter.

One should consider participating in professional organizations beyond the more obvious ones such as the Association of Academic Physiatrists (AAP), American Academy of Physical Medicine and

Rehabilitation (AAPM&R), or the American Congress of Rehabilitation Medicine (ACRM). Some others are the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME), American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS), Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME), and the American Medical Association (AMA). These organizations are influential in forming overall healthcare policies that can benefit our patients and our specialty. These are the forums in which you can significantly contribute to the quality and efficiency of patient care. I encourage each of you to give back to your specialty and its patients.

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