

We Must All Hang Together

A very interesting press release came across my desk just the other day. While it may not have much to do with acupuncture and Oriental medicine, it speaks volumes about what members of the same health profession can do if they're willing to work together.

On January 8, nine medical organizations announced the creation of a partnership called the Medical Society eCooperative.¹ The purpose of the eCooperative, according to the press release, is to strengthen each organization by sharing information and making that information available on the Internet.

"This is an unparalleled venture that is changing the way medical organizations interact with one another and with patients and others seeking health information," said Dr. Angela Smith, president-elect of the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM). "We are working side-by-side and sharing best practices to create informative, interesting Internet services for our organizations that each will own, control and operate."

The nine groups that belong to the eCooperative come from a wide range of specialties. In addition to the ACSM, member organizations include:

- American Gastroenterological Association (AGA)
- American Medical Women's Association (AMWA)
- American Osteopathic Association (AOA)
- Association of Black Cardiologists (ABC)
- California Academy of Family Physicians (CAFP)
- Illinois Academy of Family Physicians (IAFP)
- International College of Surgeons (ICS)
- North Carolina Academy of Family Physicians (NCAFP)

Each participant in the eCooperative will provide its members an Internet portal for accessing information and enhancing communication between practitioners. Among the features available, members will gain access to online continuing education programs; polls; surveys; and the latest professional information that affects physicians and their practices. In addition, members will receive legislative news and updates that affect their profession, including contact information for their local and national legislators.

"The Medical Society eCooperative believes that each professional association knows best what its members need clinically, professionally and personally to enhance their practices," said John Crosby, the American Osteopathic Association's executive director.

The eCooperative offers several benefits to individual physicians as well. Using the portals, doctors will be able to create online communities, making it easier to share information on clinical trials; discuss issues about practice management; and comment on general news with their colleagues across the country. Members will also have the ability to create customized websites that feature information about themselves and their practices. The sites will provide details on treatment plans and health guidelines presented by each organization, as well as a secure e-mail option that helps

insure patient privacy.

"Medical organizations and their members do not easily fit into a formula," commented James Whitehead, ACSM's executive vice president. "We believe each organization is the best source of relevant online medical information for their members and their members' patients and clients."

One of the most interesting features of the eCooperative is the way services will be delivered. Each organization in the eCooperative will be allowed to customize its services to best fit the needs of its members. A society can funnel tailored information to an individual practitioner based on that practitioner's profile. Surgeons, for example, would receive news and information related to surgery; cardiac surgeons, if they so desire, would receive information specific to cardiothoracic surgery.

"We are very impressed with how easy it is for us to upload and publish information, delivering it to particular members or groups of members with specific interests," noted Dr. J. Thomas Lamont, the chair of the AGA's publications and informatics committee.

Although only nine organizations currently belong to the eCooperative, it is expected to expand greatly in the next few months, which benefits each society involved.

"We expect more specialty societies to join the Medical Society eCooperative, whether they are national, state or local organizations," said Shelly Rodrigues, the CAFP's assistant executive director. "The Internet is a great equalizer, and a society of any size can better meet their members' needs by working with us."

That last quote by Ms. Rodrigues is what got me thinking. Here are nine medical groups of various size and influence, all with different objectives and philosophies about how health care should be practiced, yet they are able to put aside their differences and work toward a common goal.

Why can't we? We have the financial and educational resources to establish such a cooperative for acupuncture and Oriental medicine. We've been in existence much longer than Western medicine, We've established a growing foothold in the American health care field, and we are continuing to gain acceptance from legislators and insurers across the country.

At times, however, it seems as if some of the practitioners that make up the acupuncture and Oriental medicine profession are more interested in doing things to tear their colleagues down instead of trying to build relationships and that will move us all forward. Many of the challenges that faced our profession 30 years ago - practice rights, licensure, working with members of other health disciplines - still challenge us today. These challenges should have been met long ago, but they continue to hinder us in large part because of cosmetic (and often petty) differences between individuals and organizations who refuse to see the big picture.

When the Declaration of Independence was signed in Philadelphia in 1776, John Hancock warned the delegates who signed the declaration: "There must be no pulling different ways: we must all hang together." When Benjamin Franklin signed the document, he is said to have added, "We must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly, we will all hang separately."

I do not think the acupuncture and Oriental medicine profession will suffer a fate as harsh as Mr. Franklin envisioned some 225 years ago, but I am sure you get the point.

Reference

1. Littlejohn S. Medical societies launch eCooperative. Kupper Parker Communications, January

8, 2001.

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