

Transparency is Key at ASA First Annual Meeting

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On March 4th and 5th the American Society of Acupuncturists (ASA) held a successful first annual meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Attended by representatives from 21 of 24 state association members and four of approximately 14 non-voting state associations, as well as representatives of ACAOM, CCAOM, NCCAOM, and invited guests, in total 58 leaders from around the United States came together to review the most pressing issues facing the profession.

This meeting represents the culmination of many years of transition from state associations communicating with one another in an informal, collaborative capacity as the Council of State Associations (CSA), to a now formal cooperative effort within a not-for-profit structure. In July 2015, the ASA became an official 501(c)6 entity incorporated in the District of Columbia. The organization maintains a senate-style governance structure, with each member organization designating two delegates to represent the state practitioner membership in the national arena. Practitioners joining their state associations become members of the integrated professional structure when they join at the state level, so long as the state association is a member group. This streamlines the membership process and avoids competition between state and national entities.

This year's annual meeting provided participants with valuable knowledge sharing opportunities, as well as education and perspective on the state of the profession from a national viewpoint. Each of the key structural organizations of the profession (ACAOM, CCAOM, and NCCAOM) gave updates as to their activities and also answered questions about anticipated challenges the profession is facing. Gainful employment laws will alter the face of the educational landscape, as will the evolution of the First Professional Doctorate programs. An increase in off-site clinic educational opportunities is changing the relationship between schools and communities, and the development of hospital-based practice competencies is underway. Individual state associations also shared their major challenges and achievements over the past year, including efforts at membership development, improvements in organizational infrastructure, and battles against the rapidly progressing trend of unregulated acupuncture practice under the guise of "dry needling." All states had commonalities of concern, and it is hoped that the ASA community can provide substantial support so efforts need not be duplicated repeatedly in each state.

A key concern articulated from every region of the professional terrain to ASA leadership both before and after this meeting involves "transparency." How will ASA maintain transparency of operations for the profession at large? The answer to this question does not lie solely with the ASA and the question itself shines a light on the need for our profession as a whole to mature in its understanding of the role that a professional association plays. Transparency, firstly, demands that those wanting to know actively look for information and ask questions. From the outset of the organization, ASA leadership has endeavored to publicize its steps forward, major milestones, and chief initiatives. What this effort has revealed is that our profession lacks at present the infrastructure and habitual attention to activity

that allows for all practitioners and supporters to be informed of major events despite heroic volunteer effort. We still hear the questions, "What is ASA? How is ASA structured? Who makes up the ASA?" Answers to these very fine queries have been provided on a number of occasions in *Acupuncture Today*, through state association newsletters, eblasts, and at membership meetings, and on social media sites. It is the responsibility of practitioners to seek out information and it is the responsibility of the organization to make an effort to make information available. ASA will continue to use all available resources including its website (currently under development), to post activity updates on a regular basis.

A second, sometimes unwelcome aspect of transparency within a professional organization is the necessary reality that the organization has an obligation to be transparent exclusively to its members. While it is often of benefit and desired to the organization to reach far and wide with messaging, if a practitioner has not joined their state association and has not made an effort to assure the state association has become an active participant in the ASA, then that practitioner has no inherent rights to information about the organization and its activities (despite the effects that organization has on the profession as a whole). For our profession to be successful, thrive, and even survive, it is critical that as many practitioners as possible become financial and intellectual investors in the integrated professional structure. Currently, fewer than 10% of practitioners nationwide take the step to membership and actively maintain that membership. Being a member of the structure means you are a stakeholder and you have the right to information about organizational activity, and that there is a means by which you can obtain that information and affect activities of the group as a whole. Non-members do not have this right, but this is not a lack of transparency. This is the benefit of membership versus the deficit of non-membership. Please join your state associations and work to keep them active in the ASA. ASA leadership at every level will work to keep members informed of organizational activities.

A third critical component in understanding transparency is that transparency does not mean every strategic consideration and every detail of the organization be laid bare at all times. There are many situations for which making strategic plans too public too soon could harm the organization and cause it to not serve its members as well as it otherwise could. The greater the involvement of an individual in the organization, the more that individual will see the play-by-play thought process behind the actions of the collective. The executive committee of the organization should be fully aware of all aspects of activity, followed by the general board members, followed in the case of the ASA by the committee chairs of key committees, followed by the state delegates, followed by the state boards, followed by the state association professional members. This intentional chain of communication allows information to be vetted appropriately before affecting the individual state association member, preventing half-baked planning and unverified information from confusing individual practitioners, and also allowing information to be strategically released at optimal times to maximize impact. This also improves checks and balances, so if the board begins to direct activity in a way that is objectionable to the greater leadership body, that motion is halted prior to affecting individual state association members. ASA has put into place critical checks and balances to assure the board is implementing policy exclusively developed by the council of state association voting members (the "Council"). Tiered internal communications allow the board to be certain that the strategy it is developing reflects the intent of that policy.

The final aspect of transparency relevant to all, and the greatest responsibility upon the organization, is to assure the structure of the organization be clear and understandable, and the leadership adhere to the mandates of the organizational bylaws. The ASA was developed to channel the intent of the

greater practitioner base (members of their state associations) upward to the leadership of the ASA, and thereby allow the national leadership strategy to be a synthesis of the needs facing licensed acupuncturists "on the ground" nationwide. While certainly not every practitioner's opinion could be the prime directive to action for the entire collaborative, every state association member should have the opportunity to be heard and there should be an understandable pathway for those voices, and integrity of process in consideration of all positions. All leaders present at the first annual meeting held this commitment to organizational "virtue" in high regard, and it will be our mandate to maintain that virtue moving forward.

The American Society of Acupuncturists is a platform and an opportunity for practitioners nationwide to work together to lift up the profession. It has key structural safeguards to optimize the integrity of this process and its governance, but demands participation, commitment, and compassionate and constructive input as it develops. Please, work with those already involved to improve this promising and potentially very powerful tool. Join your state associations. Actively seek information about organizational activities. Give constructive feedback about what is and is not working and actively participate in efforts to improve it. If at all possible, contribute your time and expertise to the work of the group. Our profession holds tremendous talent that has the potential to exponentially amplify the impact we can make. The responsibility for our success lies on the shoulders of each and every stakeholder in this field, and together we can take the practice of cupuncture and East Asian medicine to new levels in the United States and positively affect practice worldwide. For more information, visit [url=<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B4CFzCUCHmtcQ2dwNGJoSnFxZ3c/view>]<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B4CFzCUCHmtcQ2dwNGJoSnFxZ3c/view>].

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