Saying What You Mean and Meaning What You Say

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The mission statement published in the very first issue of JAOA—The Journal of the American Osteopathic Association was simple: “to serve as a medium for the dissemination of information concerning the work of the Association, and of communication between its widely separated members.” To say the least, THE JOURNAL and its mission have evolved considerably since 1901.

In recent months, the AOA’s editor in chief, the JAOA’s two associate editors, and the members of the JAOA Editorial Advisory Board assumed the task of revising the JAOA’s mission statement to improve its relevance. We also drafted a set of goals to support the new mission statement.

The challenge of writing a mission statement is to express clearly what you mean in words that are both passionate and concise. In addition, the goals of any publication must describe the steps needed to fulfill the mission as stated—again in a concise manner. Although it sounds simple enough, the process presents some barriers.

To create an effective mission statement, most groups need to set time aside—usually at a board retreat. Because it can be a time-consuming process to reach sufficient clarity of thought to accomplish this task, some of the group’s members may resist taking the first step. In addition, some members may be skeptical about the process: Will anyone read our mission statement? Will it make a difference?

The JAOA’s mission and goals were generated the way things are often done nowadays—by conference calls and e-mails. We may have lost some of the benefit of the immediacy of meeting face-to-face, but we got the job done.

The JAOA’s new mission is “to advance medicine through the timely publication of peer-reviewed osteopathic medical research.” The goals that accompany the mission statement then describe the JAOA, express our ambitions, and define our target audiences (Figure).

Drafting a mission statement also needs to be approached within the context of the organization. In the case of the JAOA, the umbrella organization is the AOA. That umbrella can also be extended to include the 25 colleges of osteopathic medicine (COMs) and their three branch campuses. The pillars of these institutions are, arguably, the following:

- education of our students and the public
- research
- scholarly publication
- service to the community

When considering these pillars, it is important to recognize the JAOA’s position. Although we publish research, thereby educating readers and providing a service to the community, the JAOA engages directly in only one of the key purposes: scholarly publication.

The JAOA cannot function alone. For example, to be able to publish the best research related to osteopathic medicine, we need more manuscript submissions to choose from, particularly original research contributions from COMs.

Our mission statement calls for “timely” publication. For “timely” to become a reality, the JAOA requires an ever-expanding pool of peer reviewers committed to the prompt and compre-
hensive evaluation of each manuscript. We are in the process of developing better tools to assist reviewers, and we have recently begun a campaign to recruit more peer reviewers (see the JAOA’s call for peer reviewers on page 283).

To keep up with the demands of our growing profession, the JAOA will need adequate resources to conduct the editorial review process and prepare manuscripts promptly. This objective calls on the profession to make an even greater commitment to THE JOURNAL. Scholarly publication is not a luxury; it is an essential component of any profession that is dependent on research to the extent that physicians are.

Likewise, advancing the traditional tenets of osteopathic medicine will require the wholehearted participation of the members of the profession. Historically, the profession’s tenets have focused on osteopathic manipulative medicine (OMM) as being the defining characteristic of the profession.2 Because osteopathic physicians who incorporate OMM as a major part of their clinical practice have become a minority within the profession,3,4 we need to develop inclusive tenets that reflect current practices and unite all osteopathic physicians in our shared goal of improving healthcare on both the national and international levels.

The JAOA’s highest publication priority will continue to be given to research articles that reflect osteopathic medicine’s traditional emphasis on the role of the musculoskeletal system in health and disease. However, we are also looking for original research in areas of clinical practice beyond OMM, systematic reviews and meta-analyses on topics of interest to the profession, and manuscripts relevant to osteopathic medical education. In this way, we hope to meet the needs of osteopathic physicians—our primary readership—and to help fulfill the obligation of the osteopathic medical profession to be an impetus for reforming and advancing healthcare in the United States.5

The JAOA has the potential to be a source of inspiration and a vehicle for change. However, unless faculty members at COMs, AOA leaders, and other members of the profession work to advance the tenets of osteopathic medicine and help the JAOA fulfill its obligations to research, education, and clinical practice, THE JOURNAL is likely to remain a passive component within the osteopathic medical profession.

To encourage the profession to revise and advance its tenets,6 the JAOA can engage the profession in a dialogue that addresses such issues as:

- Where are we going?
- How can we promote the role of the musculoskeletal system in health and disease?
- How can we evolve as a profession to assume a more prominent role in US healthcare?

Dialogue is a process in which all parties both listen and learn. Kathy Sykes, Professor of Sciences and Society at the University of Bristol in the United Kingdom, emphasized in a 2007 Science editorial7 that good dialogue can “challenge assumptions, explore the long-term impacts of actions, generate ideas, tease out the nature of public concerns before polarized positions emerge, and help broaden consideration of issues.” The ultimate goal of such dialogue within our profession would be to prepare osteopathic physicians to engage in an even wider dialogue with the public, aimed at making wiser decisions about disease prevention and control, medical education, and healthcare policies.

Indeed, the time for public dialogue is upon us. In September 2007, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown launched a series of “citizen juries” to harness the “wisdom and experience of the British people” to tackle policy challenges.8 In August 2007, through California Speaks, 3500 Californians from various demographic backgrounds gathered at eight sites throughout the state to make their opinions about healthcare policies and reform known to state lawmakers.9 Although the California Senate Committee on Health blocked Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger’s plan for statewide healthcare,10 the governor continues to advocate for health policy reform.11

November’s national presidential election is an excellent opportunity for healthcare professionals and the public to make our case for healthcare reform—and to demand results. But are we, as osteopathic physicians, ready? Although it is clear that we have a long way to go—both in terms of truly committing ourselves to scholarly research and of truly reforming healthcare—the challenge is upon us, and it’s time to get moving.

References