

The Role of Healthcare Professional Societies

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Abstract

Is healthcare a profession in its own right? And what is the role of professional bodies? Without professional bodies, there would be no professions. Profession is distinct from a job or an occupation. Profession's distinguishing features – which include accountability, self-regulation, altruism, and a commitment to continued high standards – are actualized through the work of its professional bodies (1). Healthcare educators participate in professional bodies for many reasons to do with asserting and maintaining their place as professionals. There are three main reasons why individuals join a professional body: to demonstrate and maintain their membership of a profession; to uphold their profession's ethical

standards and enhance its special position within society and to maintain and develop their professional expertise. While each healthcare profession's infrastructure will vary, it is usually possible to observe within each area of professional practice one or more organizations that serve the public by maintaining a register of practitioners and ensuring that standards are met, serve members by offering them opportunities to add to, explore, and communicate their expert knowledge base; and to serve the profession by acting as a collective voice, particularly on issues that affect them.

Key words: Profession, Healthcare, Professional Association, Membership, Standards, Education

Medical societies, associations and groups comprising of doctors, pharmacists or other representatives of the medical profession have been present since the dawn of the Scientific Revolution in the 17th and 18th centuries (2,3). The Scientific Revolution was a series of events that marked the emergence of modern science during the early modern period in the 17th century, when developments in mathematics, physics, astronomy, biology (including human anatomy) and chemistry transformed the views of society about nature. It continued through the late 18th century, influencing the intellectual social movement known as the Enlightenment, which synthesized ideas concerning God, reason, nature, and humanity into a worldview that celebrated reason. This marked the dawn of modern medicine (4).

Dr John Coakley Lettsom, who founded the Medical Society of London in 1773, invited physicians, surgeons and apothecaries in its ranks, said that the association should be, "*A Society of medical practitioners of various ranks who would meet together to compare their observations and compare their thoughts mutually, taking note of new discoveries at home and abroad*"(5).

It is this noble challenge that was taken up by countless medical associations across the world, one of them being the Kenya Association of Physicians (KAP). Founded a quarter century ago (6), the aims and objectives of KAP is to maintain the highest standard of medical practice by providing continuing professional development to its members through various interactive physical and, since the advent of

Covid 19, now mainly virtual activities. In addition, it incorporates other core elements of a professional society, including: defence and promotion of professional interest of its members; defining and enforcing professional standards in medical training and practice; promoting academic research and exchange, and; community extension and outreach (7).

The Kenya Association of Physicians (KAP) has experienced low membership over the years. However, this apathy towards a professional society's activities by its members is not unique to doctors (8). Quite often, members often cite lack of time or incongruence of interest for their failure to adequately participate in professional societies (9). However, it is important to appreciate the fact that professional societies provide a way for individual members to remain connected in a meaningful way by facilitating structured opportunities for networking, including formal and informal mentor-mentee relationships and continued medical education opportunities. Evidently, despite the significant competing time and activity pressures, it is in the best interest of individual professionals and, by extension, the patients and community at large, for doctors to be meaningfully engaged with their professional medical associations.

Granted, medical associations are not perfect. We also know that those who join them tend to do so for their own personal reasons, which may change over time. That said, I am a firm believer that we are always stronger personally and professionally when we work

together, and the benefit of being a part of something greater in medicine has compound benefits that cannot be gainsaid.

The noble task of sharing knowledge, exchanging thoughts and the results of the latest research was the primary task of medical societies in the 18th-19th century as the exchange of information was way more limited than today. Arising from such broad consensus, recommendations or Clinical Practice Guidelines (CPGs) have remained the cornerstones of professional medical practise ever since (10).

Clinical Practice Guidelines (CPGs) promote a progressive and responsive healthcare that is based on a combination of scientific evidence, knowledge gained from clinical experience, and patient value judgments and preferences (11). They are developed through a transparent process by a group of multidisciplinary experts screened for minimal potential bias and conflicts of interest, and supported by a systematic review of the evidence. Thus, CPGs help clinician and patient decision making by clearly describing and appraising the evidence and reasoning regarding the likely benefits and harms related to specific clinical recommendations (12).

With the advent and proliferation of technology, the original function of connecting colleagues for exchanging knowledge and creating a platform for discussions has been considerably widened (13). Beyond keeping their members informed through all available means of communication, medical associations have increasingly undertaken the causes of medical professionals by advocating for their rights and interests, assisting doctors in protecting the interests of their patients, and helping settle their disputes.

In addition, as physicians, nurses, surgeons, medical students, and other medical professionals are looking for yardsticks to smoothly take the transition from analogue to digital healthcare systems, medical associations have all the means to give a helping hand. They have the structure to educate key healthcare actors about the latest technological changes and how to integrate digital health achievements in clinical practice (14).

Perhaps one of the most valuable roles a medical professional society can play is to provide a way for individual physicians to remain connected in a meaningful way with the core principles and values that led them to medicine in the first place and to those who share them. Being a physician can be a fairly

solitary enterprise, and fostering ongoing relationships with like-minded colleagues can serve to counter the growing sense of isolation that physicians often feel in the current healthcare environment. It is this inherent fellowship with our medical colleagues that may be the key to combating our feelings of loneliness, instead providing a sense of empowerment and restoring joy in the work of doctoring (12).

For professional bodies to survive into the next century, further change will be necessary. Such changes will almost certainly include closer inter-professional working and the development of multi-professional collaborations and mergers. Healthcare educators, whatever their clinical or academic specialty, need to work together to raise the status of healthcare education as a profession; it is therefore important that individuals support and participate in their professional bodies as a means of developing healthcare education for the benefit of students, patients, and society as a whole (15).

Thus, by balancing the professional against economic, commercial and social pressures, the professional society lends equilibrium to the otherwise dizzyingly changing medical landscape. Let us all maintain our membership in the KAP; let us actively participate in its programmes; and let us rejoice in the shared labour and responsibility of our hallowed calling.

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