



Sierra Sacramento Valley Medicine

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President's Message

Are We Still Relevant?



By Bill Sandberg

There may be a relative calm for medicine in our region - but big changes are on the way.

I ALWAYS ENJOYED MY HISTORY CLASSES. But I did not understand what possible relevance history would play in my career. I know now that understanding what happened in medicine, and why, is vital to dealing with change and planning for the future. Medicine has been in constant flux and we seem to be headed for the biggest changes since Medicare and Medicaid.

Recently, a retired physician recalled that when he joined SSVMS every physician was a member. He wondered about our relevancy; it seemed to him that organized medicine had lost its standing and influence. There was a time when I would have fired off a long list of all that was being done right now in the courts, the Legislature, in Congress and our communities for physicians and patients alike. While I can still do that, a history lesson is more fun.

I believe we are in a cycle of relative calm, especially in the Sacramento region. Controversies and hassles are nowhere near what they were in the late 80s and early 1990s. Medical groups have matured and competition for physicians, patients and power seems to have settled down. I think it is the calm before a storm.

But, let's get back to history. Yes, in the late 50s, all physicians belonged to the society. We know that because we have checked our membership list against a phone book from the same era. Physicians were in solo practice and none could survive without membership. It was mandatory for hospital privileges. Making a living was nearly impossible if you were not a member. Joining was the first step in building a successful practice; a physician's credibility and success depended on it.

At our founding in 1850, the medical society's first steps were to separate physicians from charlatans (not an easy task back then), establish a fee schedule to bring reason and fairness to charges, create opportunities for ongoing medical education, and, of course, build a state organization and participate in AMA activities.

The themes throughout our history have been the same: the business of medicine, insurance and insurance reform, professional liability, science and education, quality care, community health, community service, political involvement and public relations for the profession. Over time, these themes have waxed and waned in importance and attention.

For example, the 1850 cholera epidemic consumed this society's efforts for some time and led us to create California's first public health department. We established our region's first blood bank in 1948, now known as BloodSource. For many years we funded and maintained Northern California's largest, fully staffed medical library. During the malpractice crisis in 1975, we were instrumental in creating the NORCAP Council which ultimately established NORCAL Mutual Insurance Company. In response to competition, we established the Foundation Health HMO, later lost control of it and saw it develop into the only Fortune 500 company headquartered in Sacramento. Alas, we witnessed its painful demise, too.

So hold on to your hats and perhaps your wallets. We are on the edge of massive change. Whether good, bad or indifferent, it's going to be big. There will be new roles to play, services to provide and challenges to hurdle. If history is any indication, organized medicine will play a huge role in this change, and we will be admired for our leadership, scorned for self-interest, praised for our care - and hassled to death.

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