

# Roger Litwiller's Presidential Address to the ASA House of Delegates, 2004

*The following are excerpts from the visionary and inspirational speech by ASA President Roger Litwiller to the 2003 House of Delegates.*

**T**his morning I want to share with you my vision for the ASA. It is that the ASA will grow as a society of physicians and scientists who are driven by compassion and guided by science to provide the best and safest patient care, and furthermore, that ASA members will come to understand that in order to achieve this mission there must be involvement in the political process that has come to define how medicine is practiced in this great land.

Compassion, science, involvement ... Three rather simple words, yet these three words define the essence of a physician.

Compassion is the first part of my vision for the ASA.

Compassion is a quality that every physician must possess.

Compassion is what causes us to place our patients ahead of ourselves.

Compassion is what drives us to spend long hours helping to alleviate the pain and suffering that confronts us daily.

Compassion is what causes us to gently hold the hand of an anxious patient.

Compassion is what drives us to study the sciences to better prepare ourselves to care for our patients.

And compassion is what forces us to be involved in the processes that control and define our ability to care for patients.

The second part of my vision requires that our science be strong and be a guiding light. We are in danger here! There is trouble in our academic programs. These are the very programs that are the source of our science. These are the very programs that are training the next generation of anesthesiologists. Increased clinical loads and decreased payments jeopardize research and training. The number of research funding grant applications from academic anesthesiologists is decreasing. The number of scientific submissions to our journal, *Anesthesiology*, is decreasing. This is occurring at a time when the brightest and best medical students are again choosing anesthesiology as their specialty. We must not let these young physicians down.

## **Roger Litwiller's ASA Presidential Address—Cont'd**

Fair payment for the care and teaching academic anesthesiologists provide must be forthcoming if our academic programs are to survive. If our academic programs fail, our specialty is one generation away from extinction and the safety of our patients is in jeopardy!

The problem of fair payment for services rendered is not a problem unique to our academic programs. Every anesthesiologist faces increasing practice costs with decreasing practice income. The reasons for these increased costs are known. The federal government continues to increase the number and complexity of the regulations which govern our practices while at the same time it decreases the amount of payment we receive for the care we render our patients. Third party payers are quick to try to benchmark their payments to those of the federal government.

The medical liability crisis continues to worsen. Medical liability insurance companies continue to increase their premiums for the insurance we must have. Tort reform remains elusive in many states. The United States Senate refuses to believe that this is a crisis that deserves a solution.

The resolution of these problems lies not in a scientific discovery or in research, but in the arena of politics. Politics is the antithesis of science. Now we have arrived at the third part of my vision of the ASA: involvement in the political process. I fear that this part of the vision will be much harder to accomplish than the first two parts of my vision. Involvement in the political process is necessary for our survival now and for the foreseeable future. Sadly, ASA members are not involved in the political process.

Let me cite three examples. ASA members were asked early this year to contact their members of Congress to express concern about the projected 4.5% decrease in Medicare payments to physicians. Less than 10% of the ASA members responded. Recently, ASA again asked for you to contact your members of Congress to express concern about a 4-5% decrease in Medicare payment scheduled for January 1, 2004. This time the response has been worse than it was in January! When the Senate considered a cloture vote on debate of the Senate bill on tort reform, ASA members were asked to contact their Senators and ask them to support the cloture vote. Less than 10% of the ASA members responded. When the ASAPAC 2003 year ended at the end of September, less than 10% of the ASA members were ASAPAC contributors.

We will not be successful if our involvement in the political process continues at the present level. Aristotle said, "Man is by nature a political animal." What is clear to me is that Aristotle never met a physician—at least not a 21st century

## **Roger Litwiller's ASA Presidential Address—Cont'd**

physician who was an ASA member. Ronald Reagan said, "Politics is supposed to be the second oldest profession. I have come to realize it bears a very close resemblance to the first." Perhaps that explains why so many physicians are uninvolved in the political process today. Politics is simple. It's all about participation, money, and votes. It requires nothing more, and it will settle for nothing less. In short, it requires involvement! This morning I ask for your help when you return to your component societies and your local practices. Be a leader in helping your colleagues understand this fundamental truth.

Our compassion will not save our specialty.

Our science will not save our specialty.

When our income and our expenses are equal, we are out of business. For some of us working with large numbers of federal and state insured patients, we are almost there.

If we do not get our involvement in politics right, our compassion and science won't matter. We will cease to exist.

The problems that acutely threaten our survival have solutions in the political arena.

The message I ask you to take home is simple and yet profound:

**If we as physicians don't get involved in the political process, our science and compassion will not matter. We will have ceased to exist!**

Compassion, science, involvement ... three rather simple words, yet these three words define the essence of a physician.

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