

EDITORIAL

The value of belonging

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As orthopaedic surgeons we can belong to various organisations and associations. It is mandatory to be registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). Other associations include: the South African Orthopaedic Association (SAOA), the South African Medical Association (SAMA) and various sub-groups. Membership of these is voluntary but serves a very valuable purpose.

The foundations of the SAOA were laid in 1942 by the founding group of four dedicated orthopaedic surgeons. This was followed by the SAOA, which was established in 1951 and had 45 members. Through the years, membership grew to a total of 745 in 2017. The founders are still honoured for their contribution in the form of eponymous lectures, medals and prizes. The total of 745 consists of various categories of which the full members are in the majority, followed by registrars in training. There are 458 full members.

The concerning aspect is that the number of full members (the backbone of the Association) is not showing a substantial increase as would be expected, especially with the number of orthopaedic surgeons that qualify each year.

This is not a phenomenon of the SAOA only, but an international trend. Various associations, medical and non-medical, have the same problems as stated in various publications.

We are in an era where social media plays a major role and contact with our peers is only a tweet away. This aspect rightly questions the role of membership of an organisation. In the literature the answer to this question is: yes, even in today's global society, there are still valuable benefits in belonging to an association such as the SAOA.

The vision of the founding group was that we must work as a group to obtain our goals and to improve orthopaedic surgery in all categories of membership.

SAOA membership benefits

1. Comaraderie/negotiating power

As a member of a professional organisation we get together at meetings, conventions, workshops, etc. We share the same goal and that is to be one big family which will take on any problem and try to solve it.

The SAOA is currently actively negotiating and bargaining on behalf of its members. This is absolutely necessary in this era of threats to doctors and their billing rights.

This can only be done from a position of strength, in other words, with the support of all the members.

2. Annual conventions and meetings

The SAOA has annual conventions to which international speakers are invited. The advantage is contact with your peers, locally and internationally, as well as the sharing of knowledge and experience through workshops and lectures.

This also brings the orthopaedic surgeons together socially and, especially, involves their partners who contribute a lot to keeping the family going.

3. Certification of education

The HPCSA requires continuous education to stay registered in your speciality. This is the ideal opportunity to fulfil these requirements and the Association goes out of its way to provide the necessary points, especially ethical points.

4. Peer review

As in any organisation there are members with different views and methods to obtain their goals.

The SAOA can evaluate and protect their members when there is a difference of opinion. This will give a member a feeling of safety. It can also give members the opportunity to rectify the problem and get more training, without the threat of litigation.

5. Profiling and recognition

The group gives a platform where members can present themselves, do research and also publish their work. There are various rewards available, backed by the industry, and give the members a stimulus to do more and better.

6. Networking

The SAOA has a very active website and membership database. Although there are various international networks, our own SAOA, through its network and meetings, gives us the opportunity to actively communicate with our peers.

As mentioned there are many orthopaedic surgeons who do not belong to the Association, but who still can benefit from our activities.

Reasons why membership dwindles

1. Individualism

Orthopaedic surgeons tend to become more individualistic by doing their own thing, especially in the field of super specialisation. They tend to join the sub-groups and neglect their membership to the mother association. The Association provides space for super-specialised groups in their annual convention and would like to get all these members back again.

2. Costs

The costs are ever increasing and this includes membership fees and congress fees.

With the trade that will not sponsor doctors to Association events, the costs are increasing and doctors make more use of social media and networking. This must be addressed and membership to an association must be made affordable. Tax rebates for the full-time doctor is one of the big issues.

3. Family-related demands

Particularly in the younger doctors, there are increasing demands from the family where the doctor is seldom at home. They are very busy and cannot afford to be away from their families and commitments constantly.

Because of this they tend to move towards the internet and social media for information and contacts.

4. Finances

Many surgeons today are self-employed in single practices and they cannot afford to lose valuable time when they have to generate income to cover their expenses.

With all the above we can see that there are several reasons for the stagnation and decline of our membership. There are also no foolproof solutions for recruitment other than selling the benefits to our members.

Being a member of the SAOA since 1973, I have had various opportunities to serve the SAOA. These include several portfolios on the EXCO and a term as President.

I have been the membership secretary for the past 15 years.

My wife and I have been actively involved in the organisation of numerous congresses, partner programmes and activities.

As President Couple we travelled widely and made wonderful friends.

These are some of the numerous benefits that I got out of my membership of the SAOA.

You can always find time to serve an organisation despite your workload.

There is truth in the saying: 'If you want something done, ask a busy person to do it. The more things you do, the more you can do.'

With the above in mind, I ask all the orthopaedic surgeons in South Africa and the registrars to actively join the SAOA and participate in the Association's activities. The more we participate, the more we can benefit.

