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FROM THE DESK OF THE PRESIDENT

If We Build It, They Will Come: The Importance of Structure

It's hard to believe that another annual meeting is upon us, and another presidential year is coming to a close. In the past year, the entire internal structure of NASS has changed for the better—but those aren't the only changes we've been up to. Time certainly does fly when you're having fun.

Organizational Restructuring

The operations and management of an organization are a reflection of its vision and strategy. By far the biggest undertaking of the Board of Directors this year was the restructuring of the Board itself, along with the Councils and Committees that comprise the NASS leadership. As I discussed in previous messages this year, in this era of accountability and transparency it had become clear that NASS needed a guiding principle, a delineation of what mattered most to NASS and its members, so that we could more clearly and responsibly determine our vision and strategy. It became clear that structure mattered and that ours needed retooling.

We began the restructuring process with a series of strategic planning meetings that included senior staff and analyzed what worked and what didn't, in the hopes of streamlining our operations. We then jettisoned over 60 separate projects that were outside of our new Central Operating Principle (COP), formerly called the "hedgehog concept" from Jim Collins's book, *Good to Great*. The next phase of this rethinking of the society's modus operandi was a restructuring of not only the remaining projects, Committees and Councils, but of the Board itself. We've paired down the Council structure into a lean, mean, management machine, facilitating communication between areas of influence and eliminating

the "silo effect" that often plagues growing organizations. This structure will be presented for approval at the Annual Meeting; a staff reorganization to mirror the Council structure will follow.

Ethics and Disclosure: Major Steps

Another significant undertaking this year has been in the arena of conflict of interest and disclosure policy. As I've discussed in the past, potential conflicts of interest are not in themselves bad—in fact, the future of medical innovation is contingent upon cooperation between physicians and industry. In a letter to the Senate Special Committee on Aging in May 2008, I wrote, "This symbiotic relationship is necessary for the advancement of medicine; counseling our members to avoid all collaboration with industry would stifle innovation, impede progress for the field of spine care and, ultimately, be counter to our patients' best interests. With our guiding principle to 'foster the delivery of quality spine care,' we cannot neglect innovation. What we must do is to provide clear direction to both our members and industry for how to collaborate with the highest degree of ethical behavior and professionalism."

NASS first adopted our "Acceptance of Appointment and Covenant to Disclose" document in 1996, requiring all those in leadership or committee positions to disclose all conflicts before serving. NASS was ahead of the disclosure curve. Promoting the highest ethical standards for spine physicians in every aspect of the society has been a passion among NASS leadership since 2001, when Stanley A. Herring, MD, chose ethical behavior as the centerpiece of his NASS presidential efforts. From the creation of the Professional Conduct and Ethics Committee in 2002, to the implementation

of a comprehensive Conflict of Interest Disclosure Policy in March 2006, to the current effort to expand and strengthen all of our existing policies, NASS has a legacy of providing spine professionals with strong, clear guidance on ethical practices.

We take this issue very seriously. NASS has already implemented some of the most stringent obligations for disclosure among professional medical organizations, and the NASS Ethics Task Force is in the process of preparing recommendations regarding policy modifications for the Board of Directors, including more specificity in disclosing financial relationships.

During our June 2008 meeting, the Board decided to create a new Conflict of Interest (COI) Review Committee as well as an ex officio position for an ethicist on the Board of Directors. The new COI Review Committee will assist NASS members in determining—from an unbiased perspective—the existence and/or severity of potential conflicts and their proper disclosure, as well as evaluating the conflicts of potential candidates for leadership positions in the organization. The Committee will be populated and ready to serve NASS members in time for the Annual Meeting in October. The ex officio ethicist will advise his/her fellow Board members on the management of conflicts of interest throughout the organization. Our policies will continue to evolve over time as NASS, government agencies and commercial entities work collaboratively toward the common goal of transparency and accountability for the common good of patients, health care entities and society.

Advocacy Efforts

The past year has been anything but typical for NASS Advocacy. The 435 House and 35 Senate seats up for re-election combined with the presidential election make for a very interesting legislative cycle.

We continue to face and overcome drastic cuts to our reimbursements

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through Medicare. In early July, Congress averted scheduled cuts of 10.6% for 2008 and provided for a 1.1% increase in 2009 reimbursements. Along side fair reimbursement, physician/industry relations have risen to the top of our advocacy agenda. Earlier this year, by Sen. Herb Kohl (D-WI), Chair of the Senate Aging Committee, asked NASS to provide documentation on our relationships with industry. Not only did we comply but we used the opportunity to provide additional information on NASS' leadership in the field of physician ethics and disclosure.

In addition to a hearing on the topic, Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-IA) introduced legislation that attempts to provide more transparency in the field but requires that certain "transfers of value" between physicians and industry be reported and published on a publicly accessible Web site. NASS worked closely with our colleagues in the Alliance of Specialty Medicine to educate bill sponsors on the importance of physician/industry collaboration. In meetings on the Hill, we stressed that legislation should not overburden our member physicians and should ensure that relationships between physicians and industry benefit the patients we serve. At the time of this writing, no legislation has been enacted but I am confident that if it is, the compromise that we have worked out with Congressional leaders, physician groups and industry representatives will allow our members to continue transparent, ethical relationships that benefit both the field of spine care and the patients who require our expertise.

Milestone: A Full Year of Courses at SMI

The Spine Masters Institute, NASS' educational bio-skills lab facility, has experienced great success in 2008. SMI integrates the latest, most robust media and audio technology available, engineered to meet NASS' vision of training and collaboration. The facility boasts such technology applications as automatic camera tracking; simultaneous live and on-demand recordings of video, audio and imaging from multiple rooms which are streamed directly to NASS' Web site.

A total of 32 educational hands-on courses have been scheduled at SMI through the end of 2008. The diversity of courses that NASS presented this year has truly encompassed our multi-disciplinary nature. Topics included: Lumbar Spinal Injections, Cervical Spine Stabilization, Minimally Invasive Spine Techniques, PA/NP Surgical Skills and Spine Surgery Technology Update: Implications for Allied Health Professionals. NASS would like to thank the many medical specialty societies and industry that have helped shape SMI's success in its first full year of operation, including: Pfiedler Enterprises, Broadwater, International Spine Intervention Society, American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, American Society for Surgery of the Hand; Stryker, Kyphon, Kimberly Clark, DePuy and Blackstone/Orthofix. I look forward to even more successful years ahead at our state-of-the-art bio-skills facility.

What Else Have We Done for You Lately?

Although the initiatives above have encompassed a lot of our time this past year, we've continued to keep ahead of all the many important and urgent projects that we have always handled such as writing new policies, hearing professional conduct cases, influencing the reimbursement system, and educating our members in a variety of ways.

We published three new *Clinical Guidelines*: Lumbar Spinal Stenosis, Antibiotic Prophylaxis in Spine Surgery, and Diagnosis and Treatment of Degenerative Lumbar Spondylolisthesis—just one example of how we continue to define quality health care.

NASS Socio-Economic Affairs Council and Coding committees continue to actively participate in the CPT/RUC process to protect and grow reasonable reimbursement for services provided by physicians providing spine care.

Building on the success of *The Spine*

Although this year has been one of the most successful—and the most challenging—in NASS' history, our volunteers, leaders and staff members have all been up to the challenge.

Journal, we evaluated and renegotiated our publishing partnership with Elsevier Science to benefit members, readers and authors. Beginning in January 2009, we will increase the *Journal's* frequency to monthly, increase four-color printing (and eliminate those charges to authors) and provide a complimentary online subscription to *Seminars in Spine Surgery* to members. We were also accepted by Thomson Scientific for indexing and will report the *Journal's* first impact factor in 2010.

We are also developing a micro Web site targeted toward the general public to educate them on spinal disorders and their management. The site will promote NASS and its members by establishing

credibility as an unbiased and up-to-date spine care resource.

Although this year has been one of the most successful—and the most challenging—in NASS' history, our volunteers, leaders and staff members have all been up to the challenge. I am honored to have served as President this year and to have worked with such amazing leadership, volunteers and staff. We have a truly valuable and dynamic organization. My sincere thanks to you, the membership, for allowing me the honor of leading the greatest Society in the world dedicated to multidisciplinary spine care.

See you in Toronto!