

# Why Should I Join My Specialty Societies?

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I admit it. I am a professional association junkie. I belong to more than 20 professional societies that serve dermatologists in my home state and in my region, nationally and internationally, as well as 2 other societies encompassing the entire house of medicine. I have worked on the boards of 6 of them and I have been on committees or developed educational programs for 15 of them. Dermatologists tend to be joiners and I enjoy being with my colleagues. However, in terms of my daily job of taking care of patients with skin disease, what are the real benefits of joining these professional associations?

Common advice on the Internet is for professionals to join relevant associations. Anderson<sup>1</sup> on college.monster.com recommends that undergraduates seek membership in professional organizations for job opportunities, mentoring, professional development, networking, and scholarships. Some associations offer exclusive resources and group buying power. Others are prestigious and membership is a capstone achievement. There is strength in numbers, making advocacy a mission of many professional associations.

The AAD is the largest, most diverse, and most multifaceted of the dermatology associations to which I belong. For the last 6 years I have been privileged to serve as one of the secretary-treasurers, and I have seen the time and effort spent by many of my fellow dermatologists for the good of dermatology. The AAD has 19,265 members, of which the largest subgroup is the category of active fellows (10,858); 90% of dermatologists certified by

the American Board of Dermatology belong to the AAD and 96% of members renewed last year (Cindy Kuhn, personal communication, February 2016). In 2016, the AAD surveyed the satisfaction of members by administering an online questionnaire inviting responses from a randomly selected 5975 members (excluding internationals, retirees, or those older than 72 years). The respondents ranked the major activities of the AAD according to their importance. Most important were professional development and educational programs (70% said very important) and up-to-date information on dermatology (70%). Also ranked highly were advancing advocacy agenda (57%), increasing public awareness (54%), and increasing visibility in the house of medicine (55%). Of less importance were products and services to support practice (29%), networking within the profession (25%), reference directory of members (24%), member discounts (22%), opportunity to gain leadership experience (10%), and career and employment opportunities (14%). In general, the members were either very satisfied or satisfied with the activities corresponding with the ranked importance. Overall satisfaction with the AAD was 88%. When divided demographically, young women in academics and group practice were somewhat more satisfied with AAD services and benefits than men older than 60 years in solo practice, though even in the latter group more than 83% were either very satisfied or satisfied. More than 67% of the members supported the initiatives taken for enhanced online education and information resources; data collection and registry platforms; development of new models of payment; and education, training, and online resources for the dermatology care team. Members of the AAD also can attend the meetings (7992 members at the 73rd Annual Meeting in 2015; 1639 at the 2015 Summer Academy Meeting) and read the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* and *Dermatology World*. In 2015, 10,061 AAD members participated in CME activities (Cindy Kuhn, personal communication, February 2016). In addition,

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members work within the committee and task force structure; in the last few years, the Organization Structure Committee and the officers have worked hard to place almost everyone who applied for an assignment on a committee.

Do dermatologists reflect the association world? We are incredibly engaged and the AAD's penetration into the community and high renewal rate are unique. In 2014, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.,<sup>2</sup> surveyed 1.2 million research professionals across 75 disciplines to learn how research professionals view scholarly societies and associations. Similar to AAD members, these professionals indicated that they joined their societies to take advantage of peer-reviewed journals, learning opportunities, and publications on techniques and trends. There was little variation across age, geographic location, and member status. The primary reason members renewed was because they felt connected to the community and appreciated the mentorship and networking that was available.<sup>2</sup>

The future of dermatology and specialty societies is dependent on young dermatologists who are currently in residencies or in their first jobs. They need the professional development, educational opportunities, networking and mentoring, and other benefits of joining specialty societies. Although skilled at acquiring networks through social media, the best growth and leverage of their professional networks occur within professional associations. Because of my experience meeting other dermatologists in the association world, I can find expert physicians for my patients who have unique problems or who have moved out of my location. Colleagues who have met me in person also seek me out to take care of their patients. Much learning occurs online; however, the value of attending educational sessions can be found in the ability to ask questions in real time and in the face-to-face connection with the experts as well as other members with similar interests. I recently attended a session on interesting hospital consultations and we had an active discussion about drug

eruptions with many questions from the audience. The next day I was called to my hospital to see a patient and I went with confidence that I could use my new knowledge to ensure a good outcome. Most importantly, in this era of rapid unprecedented technological advances, the data and the information it produces are transforming our culture. When members with similar interests, skill sets, and goals come together in an effective professional association, they have the strength in numbers to drive change in a way that facilitates growth and development in the specialty. In 2016 this may be the single best reason to join a professional society. We can insure patients with skin disease receive excellent dermatological care by working with other dermatologists in our state and national societies to keep our knowledge and skills current, push for new concepts and treatments, and advocate for our patients and our practices.

The most important reason I joined dermatology associations is the stimulation from learning new concepts and skills in the presence of others who are also passionate about dermatology. Finding jobs to do within these groups was a natural progression of my membership and my career and has insulated me against the lurking danger of professional burnout. I recommend the same prescription for you: Join local, regional, and national dermatology associations; attend meetings; and find interesting work furthering the specialty with other passionate dermatologists.

## REFERENCES

1. Anderson LB. 5 Reasons professional organizations are worth joining. Monster College website. college.monster.com/training/articles/2131-5-reasons-professional-organizations-are-worth-joining. Published June 16, 2011. Accessed April 8, 2016.
2. Membership matters: lessons from members and non-members. Wiley website. <https://chm.memberclicks.net/assets/docs/membership%20matters%202014%20-%20findings.pdf>. Published March 2015. Accessed April 25, 2016.

## QUICK POLL QUESTION



**How many professional associations in dermatology do you belong to?**

- a. none
- b. 1 to 2
- c. 3 to 5
- d. 6 to 10
- e. >10

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