

# Leaders Helping Leaders: The American Dermatological Association as a Model of Lifelong Professional Community

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## PRACTICE POINTS

- Professional relationships are a critical determinant of career longevity and personal well-being. Structured opportunities for mentorship, reflection, and intergenerational dialogue within professional societies can help mitigate burnout and foster sustained leadership development.
- Medical societies serve as leadership incubators. Through selective membership, cross-organizational representation, and sustained engagement, the American Dermatological Association models how professional community strengthens the specialty beyond scientific exchange alone.
- Physicians benefit from intentional engagement in organized dermatology. Participation in local, state, and national societies cultivates mentorship networks, broadens perspective, and lays the foundation for future leadership opportunities.

The American Dermatological Association (ADA), founded in 1876, is a professional society composed of board-certified dermatologists who have demonstrated sustained leadership and contributions to the specialty. As the ADA approaches its 150th anniversary, its enduring strength lies not only in its scientific programming but also in its culture of mentorship, collegiality, and intergenerational connection. Selective membership fosters meaningful professional relationships and sustained engagement across academic, private practice, and organizational leadership domains. In an era marked by increasing administrative burden and physician burnout, intentional professional community may serve as a protective factor that promotes resilience, purpose, and career longevity. For residents and early-career

dermatologists, the ADA offers a model of how structured relationships, mentorship, and service within organized medicine can shape both professional development and personal fulfillment.

Have you ever heard of the American Dermatological Association (ADA)? While many residents may not yet be familiar with this group, its members are among the most respected leaders in dermatology. They serve as current and past presidents of influential organizations including the American Academy of Dermatology (Susan C. Taylor, MD [Philadelphia, Pennsylvania]), the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery (M. Laurin Council, MD, MBA [Creve Coeur, Missouri]), and the Association of Professors of Dermatology (Sewon Kang, MD [Baltimore, Maryland]). Others lead certification boards or serve as editors of key journals like the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* (Dirk Elston, MD [Charleston, South Carolina]), *JAMA Dermatology* (Kanade Shinkai, MD [San Francisco, California]), and *Cutis* (Vincent A. DeLeo, MD [Los Angeles, California]).

The ADA is celebrating its 150th anniversary in 2026. What makes the organization so enduring is not just its history, but its culture. The members of the ADA foster deep, long-lasting relationships, and its meetings are purposefully designed to balance structured scientific sessions with unscheduled time for reflection, conversation, and connection. That intentional design cultivates learning, innovation, and wellness.

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**TABLE. Value of Relationship Building to a Fulfilling Life**

Dimension of Life	Impact of Relationships
Career advancement	Mentorship and networking open doors to opportunities and leadership roles
Mental health	Strong social ties are protective against burnout, anxiety, and depression
Longevity	Harvard research <sup>3,4</sup> shows social connection predicts longer, healthier lives
Personal growth	Honest feedback and diverse perspectives foster resilience and insight
Life satisfaction	Supportive relationships improve overall happiness and sense of purpose

Steven Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*<sup>1</sup> highlights the importance of renewal and relationship building, as does the Harvard Study of Adult Development, one of the longest-running research projects on well-being.<sup>2-4</sup> The key conclusion? Relationships are the strongest predictors of long, healthy, and fulfilling lives, not wealth or achievement. Medical training is intense, and the emphasis often falls squarely on achievement. But the friendships you form in medical school, residency, and early career are just as formative. Membership with the ADA continues this spirit of connection throughout one's professional life, with meetings that welcome spouses and partners and encourage engagement across generations.

A hallmark of ADA culture is its commitment to mentoring and mutual support. Need advice about transitioning from private practice to academia? Navigating department leadership? Applying for a grant? Considering industry, editorial, or global health roles? Within the ADA, there's someone who has done it and is eager to help. Recent meetings have addressed future-facing topics such as artificial intelligence, bedside diagnostics, workforce advocacy, and global health while also carving out time for rejuvenating activities: book clubs with best-selling authors, sessions on the arts, storytelling, wellness, and travel. This holistic programming reflects the ADA's belief in supporting the whole physician.<sup>3</sup> Members understand the value of relationships and appreciate these opportunities to learn about the passions and interests of their colleagues (Table).

Candidates are nominated by current members and must be board certified and at least 10 years beyond completion of their training. Members vote upon candidates in a rank voting system each year. If someone is nominated and not selected, they did not fail—they may be nominated again. The idea behind this membership process is to keep the organization small enough that members can get to know one another—there are currently 552 active members. Importantly, the ADA

has embraced diversity and inclusion. While historically male- and White-dominated, recent inductee classes now reflect gender parity and a broader range of backgrounds, enriching the organization with fresh perspectives.<sup>5-8</sup>

For residents and fellows, the lesson is clear: friendships, mentorship, and time for reflection are not luxuries—they are essential. Burnout stems from relentless output in isolation; however, in cultures that prioritize renewal, authenticity, and community, physicians can flourish.<sup>9</sup> Membership in small professional organizations is an important step towards avoiding isolation. We encourage you to be active in your local, state, and national organizations.

The ADA stands as a powerful example of how professional societies can help you build the kind of life and career you want, not just a résumé. From informal beachside conversations to high-level scientific discussions, its enduring strength is this: leaders helping others lead.

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