

Why professional policies matter

Later this month, when 200 or so ASHP members take their seats in the House of Delegates at the Summer Meeting, the Society will experience again its annual apex of renewal. As one yearly cycle of policy development draws to a close, another begins, continuously expanding and refining what ASHP stands for as the collective voice of health-system pharmacists in the United States. This process embodies one of the most fundamental benefits of ASHP membership and one of ASHP's greatest sources of strength.

Various methods are used by associations for determining their stance on issues. Most commonly, this is a responsibility of the governing board, but ASHP has taken a different direction. In its early years, ASHP's policy development consisted of representatives of local and regional chapters voting on resolutions introduced at the annual meeting. Building on this participatory tradition, ASHP has evolved a well-articulated process that engages hundreds of members. Some contribute through an official capacity such as appointment to a council, service on a section or forum executive committee, or election as a state delegate. Others are involved by suggesting issues for policy attention and by commenting on policy proposals.

Although "policy development" is not found on a list of membership benefits, this facet of ASHP does have great value to the individual member. On one level, a member can take satisfaction in supporting a process that builds the identity, authority, influence, and stature of health-system pharmacy. On another level, a member can enhance his or her leadership skills and knowledge of health care issues by becoming active in the process of policy development.

ASHP members have a strong tradition of creating professional policies¹ that are high-minded, reaching for what is best from the patient's perspective, not merely what is expedient. This idealism has been sustainable partly because of the diversity of participants in the process—diversity in practice focus, practice site, generational values, and geographic region. Any hint of self-protectionism or narrow thinking tends to be challenged by those who take a broader view.

The utility of ASHP professional policies is manifold. ASHP's positions foster cohesiveness among health-system pharmacists, which allows them to be more effective in attaining their professional goals. ASHP's professional policies give the organization a map for investing resources and focusing

advocacy. ASHP's policies open doors for the advancement of the field at individual practice sites and on the larger stage of national health care delivery. Finally, ASHP's policies open the eyes of the public to the aspirations of health-system pharmacists and help dissipate outdated images of our profession.

Many specific examples can be listed of how the professional policies crafted by ASHP members have influenced the direction of pharmacy. For instance, consider the long-standing leadership of ASHP members in proclaiming that technicians, as a vital component of pharmacy's work force, must be nurtured in order for pharmacists to achieve their full potential. The concept of state authorization of pharmacists to engage in collaborative drug therapy management got its initial boost from ASHP policies. The ASHP House of Delegates has been a consistent source of upward pressure on pharmacy's educational requirements. And where would hospital medication safety be today had it not been for the loud policy voice of ASHP members on this topic for the past several decades?

Currently, at ASHP Connect (www.ashp.org/ashpconnect), members can find a discussion forum on the latest policy proposals, which cover such timely issues as antimicrobial stewardship, the role of nonpharmacists in managing pharmacy departments, and the contributions of pharmacists in the medical home. ASHP's final positions on these issues will be enhanced if more members "click and comment" before delegates cast their votes.

As ASHP continues to apply Web-based communication techniques to its methods of doing business, members will find it increasingly easier to engage in the policy process. Members are invited to suggest new methods that ASHP should consider for making participation in policy development more appealing and efficient (email ideas to policy@ashp.org).

The sum of the knowledge, values, ethics, ideals, and aspirations of health-system pharmacists is reflected in the collective body of ASHP professional policies. Members can take pride in this core strength of ASHP and should be aware of the high expectations that surround their deliberations on the latest issues.

1. American Society of Health-System Pharmacists. ASHP policy positions and guidelines (best practices). www.ashp.org/bestpractices (accessed 2009 Apr 1).

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