

# AOA's Careful Planning Leads to International Alliance

BY BONNIE KOENIG

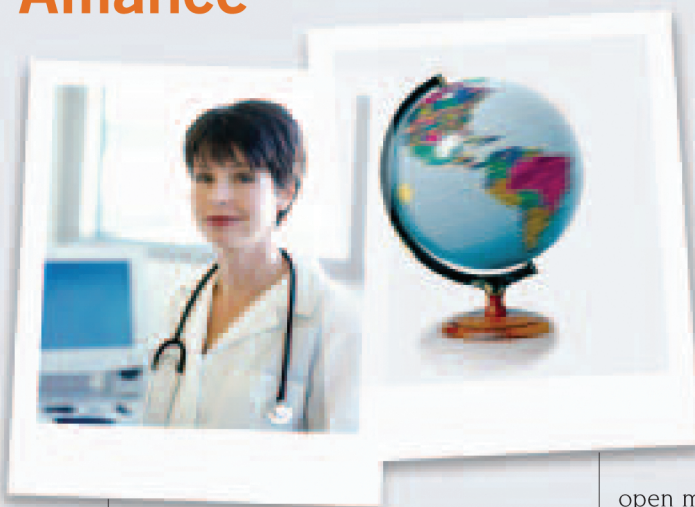
To respond to an increasing interest and involvement among its member physicians in international issues, the American Osteopathic Association (AOA) created a committee in the late 1990s to explore possible international initiatives.

Prior to this time, members and staff had made international contacts on an informal basis. The creation of the Council on International Osteopathic Medical Education and Affairs provided more structure to these activities. It was charged with reviewing what was happening with osteopathic medicine internationally and looking for opportunities for AOA involvement.

Initially, the council looked at a number of issues that were being followed by individual members and staff, such as practice rights in other countries for U.S.-trained doctors of osteopathic medicine (DOs), and exchanging information with osteopathic physicians in other countries. The council also had several open discussions to brainstorm about other areas that CIOMEA could possibly explore to provide added value to the association's members, such as creating a database of the state of osteopathy in different countries, having non-U.S. affiliates from other countries, and even creating an international center for osteopathic medicine.

As an early organizational step, CIOMEA decided to develop an international strategic plan by working with a consultant specializing in international initiatives. The plan set a mission to help the AOA become "the leading, unifying osteopathic medical education organization to ensure the continued advancement of osteopathic medicine in the U.S. and internationally." It also developed several core objectives, and a number of short- and long-term goals. As CIOMEA members later implemented and updated this plan, council members also developed a white paper for presentation to the board of trustees.

One of the goals that the council set for itself was to reach out to AOA's member-



ship and include them in CIOMEA's evolving international discussions and activities. To further this goal, a daylong international seminar was added to the pre-conference schedule for AOA's annual conference.

After several years, the work of the international council helped build a constituency for an international program beyond the small group that had originally advocated an AOA role in this area. As with any major new initiative an association undertakes and wants to sustain, it takes time to build a solid program and a committed constituency. This may be one of the lessons of the AOA's success with its international program thus far – the conscious outreach by the leadership of the international program to the organization's membership.

Initially, CIOMEA worked somewhat independently, developing its own strategic plan. But after several years of publicizing and implementing its goals and activities, the council's work naturally integrated into the association's strategic plan and became an integral part of the association's long-term vision.

Through the work of its international council, the AOA also identified a second track it wanted to take: to play a leadership role in creating an international association of osteopathic practitioners. An invitation conference for representatives of the osteopathic profession in several countries was organized by CIOMEA and held in June 2003. An outcome of this conference was the creation of a multinational steering committee charged with

developing an international alliance. The AOA agreed to staff the work of the steering committee and the initial efforts to create the new organization, now called the Osteopathic International Alliance.

As John Crosby, AOA executive director, explains: "Working to develop an international organization like the OIA requires a team effort, collaboration of

open minds and a willingness for all involved to put aside differences to concentrate on the similarities within the profession. It's hard work and takes a lot of patience, but the long-range benefits of presenting a united alliance is worth the effort."

Some additional lessons learned through the AOA's experience thus far that might be of interest to other associations:

- Allow time for the program to be nurtured and grown within the organization, including developing a strong membership constituency. Without this, it will be hard for the program to be sustained or grown within the other goals of the association that may be competing for attention. Depending on the association's own culture, the time needed to develop an international engagement may be several years.
- As with any new program, a growth trajectory is not always straightforward. There may be minor setbacks along the way. Committed advocates among the leadership and staff will be helpful to continue the forward progress.
- There is no one path to take toward international engagement that fits all associations. One strength of the AOA's program has been identifying two distinct but integrated paths: to directly serve the current interests of the AOA members through CIOMEA, and to play a leadership role in the growth of the international osteopathic community through the OIA. ■

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