

# Standing on the shoulders of giants

Richard L. Bynny, MD, editor

I am proud and honored to be serving as the Executive Director of Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society and Editor of *The Pharos*.

Our society, AΩA, is the national honor medical society for medical students, physicians in postgraduate training, medical faculty, practicing clinicians, and scientists. Alpha Omega Alpha is to medicine what Phi Beta Kappa is to letters and the humanities and Sigma Xi is to science and engineering. Our aims are the promotion of scholarship and research in medical schools, the encouragement of a high standard of character and conduct among medical students and graduates, and the recognition of significant contributions in medical science, practice, and related fields. AΩA membership is the best-recognized medical school award for achievement in medicine. Since most members are elected in medical school and before medical specialization, the membership is interdisciplinary and represents all fields of medicine. AΩA recognizes and advocates for excellence in scholarship and the highest ideals in the profession of medicine.

Our society represents more than a hundred years of hard work, perseverance, and high ideals. My predecessors in AΩA were an outstanding group of dedicated physicians who successfully led and continuously improved AΩA and our lasting mission. William Root and a small group of medical students started AΩA in 1902 at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Chicago. At that time, the practice of medicine relied on unproven traditions and mostly empirical practices. Medical education was poorly structured and medical students were poorly prepared academically. Most faculty were unqualified to teach a scientifically oriented medical curriculum. Many physicians, faculty, and students questioned the value of research in contributing positively to the practice of medicine. Root started AΩA because of students' lack of interest in scholarly attainment and their lack of high professional values. Membership in the society was based on scholarly achievement and appropriate professional demeanor and values. After AΩA's charter was granted by the state of Illinois in 1903, the group then provided leadership regionally and nationally to establish other new AΩA chapters. Root continued to lead AΩA for thirty years. Subsequent leaders, referred to as Secretary-Treasurer, included Dr. Winfield Scott Hall, Dr. Russell Burton-Opitz, Dr. John Heffron, Dr. Walter Bierring, and Dr. James Campbell. The title was later changed to Executive Secretary and Dr. Robert J. Glaser, one of my mentors, served for thirty-four years, followed by Dr. Edward (Ted) Harris, who served for fourteen years until his death last May. Many other distinguished AΩA members have provided important leadership and service to AΩA over the last 109 years.

*The Pharos*, AΩA's journal, was founded by Dr. Bierring in 1938 and is named for one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the Pharos lighthouse of Alexandria, whose beacon symbolizes the search for truth.



*The Pharos* continues as an excellent exponent of the aims and purposes of our society and showcases AΩA and the values of the profession of medicine.

AΩA's motto is: "Be worthy to serve the suffering." Our mission statement says: "Alpha Omega Alpha—dedicated to the belief that in the profession of medicine we will improve care for all patients by: recognizing high educational achievement; honoring gifted teaching; encouraging the development of leaders in academia and the community; supporting the ideals of humanism; and promoting service to others."

Up to one-sixth of a medical school class may be nominated for membership. Scholarly achievement is the primary but not the sole basis for nomination of a student. Leadership capabilities, ethical standards, fairness in dealing with colleagues, demonstrated professionalism, potential for achievement in medicine, and a record of service to the school and community are additional important criteria.

There are now 120 AΩA chapters in medical schools and there have been more than 150,000 members since the founding of AΩA. As one example of AΩA members continuing to demonstrate leadership in our profession, nearly seventy-five percent of deans of medical schools are members of AΩA. Fifty-one Nobel Prize winners in Physiology or Medicine, and in Chemistry are members of AΩA. Thirty were elected before they received the Nobel prize. Eleven U.S. Surgeons General have been AΩA members.

Chapters are led by councilors and supported by the deans, AΩA faculty, and student members. Councilors manage the nomination and election process of new members. In addition to the nomination of students, chapters also nominate faculty, residents, and alumni who fulfill AΩA qualifications. Honorary members, from among distinguished physicians and scientists ineligible for nomination by any other means, may be nominated by any member. The Councilors also submit programs and candidates for AΩA awards and honors. AΩA provides more than half a million dollars per year to support AΩA programs and awards. These include the Robert J. Glaser Distinguished Teacher Awards; the Edward D. Harris Professionalism awards; the Carolyn L. Kuckein Student Research Fellowships; AΩA Visiting Professorships; the AΩA Medical Student Service Awards; the Helen H. Glaser Student Essay Awards; the *Pharos* Poetry Competition awards; and the AΩA Volunteer Clinical Faculty Awards.

I thank the Board of Directors and members of AΩA for the opportunity to serve as the new Executive Director of Alpha Omega Alpha. I am committed to providing leadership, support, service, and advocacy for AΩA and I will work diligently and thoughtfully in my service to you. I will strive to maintain the excellence of *The Pharos* and hope excellent thinkers and writers will submit their work for consideration.

To use a metaphor, I am fortunate to be standing on the shoulders of giants.

To reiterate: "Be worthy to serve the suffering."