

MEMBERSHIP IN A NATIONAL ACADEMY OF MEDICINE

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No problem has caused more trouble to scientists and physicians than methods for selecting members of societies with limited membership. Most medical societies should not have any but the simplest limitations. But an organization devoted to service to the nation, especially as regards policy, needs to draw from the upper, relatively thin layer of the best medical, scientific and lay talent. In this case limitation is not undemocratic but a matter of making decision-making feasible. Further, such a limited membership organization should be given no governmental authority to enforce any of its recommendations. If limitation means status alone, then limitation would have no place.

I have discussed before (M. M. Aug. 5, 1963, P. 69) my views on the various kinds of societies we now have, with their merits and demerits. My suggestion of a National Academy of Medicine has brought us face to face with this old problem.

How limited should a membership be? Should membership be one of the highest honors a scientist or physician can achieve? Should continuing original research be a criterion? Should political power be a determinant of election? Should campaigns among the other members be obligate to assure election of a candidate? Who should propose the candidate? Should the candidate be aware of his nomination? Obviously, I don't know the answers but to start the discussion, let me introduce some suggestions for debate.

1. There should be no definite number of members simply because medicine is a constantly growing subject. I suppose the chief criterion of size is whether the organization effectively does the job it is supposed to do. Specific limitation makes for an exclusive status and may deprive the organization of some of the best and, further, it creates serious opposition, especially by those who are good enough for membership but are not elected.

2. I do not think membership should be so sharply defined that flexibility is not maintained. The membership should fit the worthy purposes of the Academy and not satisfy human vanity. As an example, I am far from convinced that research scientists always have the greatest political and social wisdom and it follows that a medical academy must not limit its membership wholly to research workers.

3. Political power alone should not be a determinant but power with wisdom make a most acceptable criterion for membership.

4. Representatives from other organizations should not be elected as such. The man's capabilities alone should be the guide. I would not limit membership in an academy of medicine to physicians--degrees and titles should make no difference.

5. Only those who have exhibited a willingness and desire to serve above and beyond their immediate work should be elected. This should not be only an honorary society for the greater glory of the individual, but an organization for service to the nation.

6. I would hope that an academy could find a genuine use for physicians with the wisdom and maturity which usually come with age.

This country needs to learn respect for mature judgment.

7. Election could be safeguarded to some degree from pressure groups and selfish interests by the "study-section council system." Proposals for membership would come from the membership but the proposal itself would be kept confidential. It could be categorized and evaluated by study sections, their recommendations passed on to a council that would make the final decisions. But before becoming final, the board of trustees should also approve, having the benefit of comparing those proposed for election and those rejected. The pattern appears complicated but this is deliberate to cancel out petty animosities and partisan interests which can become so destructive. Hopefully, this system would avoid the campaigning of members for the election of their especial candidate, an unwholesome procedure for any first rate organization.

I am sure that many of you will have better plans but until we come to grips with them we are not likely to get very far with the organization of an Academy of Medicine. There never has been a time when one was more needed to fill the yawning gaps between the American Medical Association and the government on the one hand and the sciences on the other. I know you can be trusted to let me hear from you!