The AAOS’s Annual Meeting: A Reflection of the Academy?

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Having had the privilege of serving on the Board of Directors of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (AAOS) for 8 consecutive years, and as its President in 1991, I feel I have gained sufficient insight to justify voicing my opinion on the evolution of its Annual Meeting, which in my opinion is a mirror reflection of the organization itself.

I recently contacted John Callaghan, President of the AAOS, and shared with him my concerns about the manner in which the Annual Meeting of the Academy seems to be evolving. He responded in a positive way, reassuring me that the Academy is addressing in earnest the issue at hand. The following paragraphs summarize my stated concerns.

The Annual Meeting is a major spectacle, which is often portrayed as the prime example of a truly comprehensive educational venture that has made a major contribution to the prestige of our discipline. However, a serious analysis of this important component of the Academy should be undertaken to determine if, in the process of evolution, the Annual Meeting has lost some of its value and become a less-than-ideal five-ring circus.

For 8 consecutive years, I listened to the Chairman of the Annual Meeting give his report to the Board of Directors. Every time I asked the Chairman, “What is the main criticism you have heard about the Meeting?” I received the same answer, “It is too big.” However, it is interesting to note that every subsequent year the meeting was bigger.

The growth of the event can be justified in several ways, because additional constructive components have been gradually added. Nonetheless, I also find it difficult to justify its current size. The most recent meeting in New Orleans included at least 1000 commercial exhibits covering the area of a major Olympic stadium, staffed by a number of employees that outnumbered the yellow-badge wearing Academy members by at least 3 to 1. Following his visit to the Commercial Exhibits, the president of the Australian Orthopaedic Association in the early 1990s commented that the “show” was “obscene.” I agreed with him.

The agenda of the recent meeting included 38 multimedia educational programs; 27 symposia; 720 podium presentations; 89 scientific exhibits; 569 poster presentations; 111 instructional courses; more than 100 podium presentations during Specialty Day; business meetings; review courses; art exhibits; a special Haiti-related exhibit; a highly sophisticated, Hollywood-like, opening ceremony; and an entertaining presentation by invited guest speakers.

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Orthopedics is known to have splintered into too many subspecialties. There are currently over 26 subspecialty societies. I believe the Academy mistakenly considers this trend a healthy sign of progress and therefore, has failed to address it in earnest.

The annual meeting, in its present form, rather than being a catalyst for unity and cohesiveness, may be weakening the glue necessary for success. The meeting does not have to cover every single corner of the field of the profession. The AAOS should consider limiting its size and let the specialty societies devoted to their constituencies serve their needs.

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I cannot help but wonder if the huge numbers of related, as well as nonrelated activities that take place during the Annual Meeting make the meeting better or worse. The educational value of the meeting is being eroded by its exaggerated size. Expecting to acquire a broad education on various subjects through attendance to the meeting is synonymous to dreaming that borrowing the 15 volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica for a few hours for a 3-day period would make anyone an expert on several fields.

What I can see from the current format is the financial benefits the Academy receives from the industrial sector. It enlarges the coffers of the organization but in the process may be demeaning its prestige and stature.

In its present form, our annual meeting cannot appropriately be called a medical convention, rather a “bazaar.” This reality may be contributing to further relinquishment of the educational duties of the organization to the implant manufacturing industry, which already controls to an unprecedented degree the education of the orthopedist.

My critical appraisal of the meeting should be taken as a call for a sound and cautious reassessment of the organization and as a sincere effort to assist in making the Academy worthy of increasing respect and admiration.