Standing Together or Alone

A lot of things are going on in the world that bother me and, I suspect, bother you too. Gun violence, the opioid crisis, climate change, corporate corruption—I could go on and on. I often want to write about these things here. It's kind of therapeutic to let my opinions roll out. I don't, because if an issue doesn't involve the oncology professions or our patients, it just doesn't seem to belong here. But is that right?

Recently, a group of oncologists and hematologists circulated a letter asking our professional societies, such as ASCO and ASH, to stop holding meetings in states with lax gun control laws. Nearly 900 people signed on. The authors hope to publish this as a letter to the editor in a major medical journal. The idea is that the financial loss to these states would encourage lawmakers to tighten up their legislation around firearms. It's an interesting thought.

But is this a slippery slope? We don't join our professional societies because of our personal views on issues. We join as a community of professionals, and these organizations provide services that we and our patients care about. Plain and simple. Further, I suspect that, if you really dug deep, you would find the same diversity of opinions on social issues in professional societies as you do in the general population.

The opioid crisis, on the other hand, might be a little different. I agree it's a real problem. The entire medical profession has gone full circle from undertreating pain to overtreating it, and now we have a national epidemic that is killing people. We can expect more oversight and safety nets to control this. Of course, we care for a patient population that often requires narcotics. Prescribing them is part of what we do. So I believe it was right for ASCO, NCCN, and other like-minded societies to speak out against restrictions that could limit patient access to the narcotics they need.

So how should our voices be heard? We each have choices about who we vote for and who we support. And we can align ourselves with other respectable groups that share our values. We are all highly trained and well educated, and we, as individuals, should be out there influencing others and loudly advocating for what we believe in. I fear too many of us share our views passionately with friends over coffee and then fade back into our own comfortable worlds without accomplishing much. Let's change that.

In a nutshell, I agree with speaking out and being proactive. But let's do this the right way. We all have a duty to be socially responsible and, as difficult as these issues are, we can't ask our professional societies to do all the hard lifting for us.

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