Why I serve: A profile of AMA leaders in med ed—Cynda Ann Johnson, MD

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Staff News Writer

Note: This regular feature profiles a leader in medical education and the AMA. If you know of an AMA-member physician that we should profile, please email us.

Name: Cynda Ann Johnson, MD

Specialty: Family medicine

Current positions and titles: Chair of the AMA Section on Medical Schools (SMS) governing council and president and founding dean of the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine and Research in Roanoke, Virginia

AMA member since: 1980

What motivated you to pursue a leadership role in the AMA?

Two colleagues were really influential in my decision to become a leader in the AMA: Betty Drees, MD, former dean at the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Medicine, and Susan Skochelak, MD, group vice president of medical education at the AMA.
I really didn’t know a lot about the AMA-SMS until Betty explained to me how it worked and how the section has influence within the AMA. This, paired with my respect for Susan and her leadership expertise, made me a very strong supporter of what the AMA is doing, particularly in medical education.

Then I found out that many people I respected were involved in the AMA-SMS and its governing council, including two colleagues from Florida State University College of Medicine: Alma B. Littles, MD, senior associate dean for medical education and academic affairs, and John P. Fogarty, MD, dean. In fact, Alma will be my successor as AMA-SMS chair in June 2015, when my term ends, and John is my predecessor in that role.

In short, my peers were the biggest influence in this regard.

**How has your AMA leadership role helped you in your professional development?**

Over my career, I have learned that every leadership position is different. I learn something different from each one. From my first year on the governing council as an at-large member, I really liked the work of the AMA-SMS and became committed to pursuing a leadership role within the organization. I learned a lot, and I realized that I had a lot to offer. I could see where I thought I could make a difference.

**How has your AMA leadership role helped you play a role in addressing some of the pressing issues for public health and the profession?**

Well, one thing I am very proud of is my participation in the ongoing strategic planning work of the AMA-SMS. This work is intended to better reflect the scope of our organization and the focus on the needs of academic physicians nationwide. These changes should be finalized in 2015 and will help the AMA-SMS set a new path for success.

As part of this process, I worked closely with staff on a lengthy memo to the AMA Council on Long Range Planning and Development that detailed the work of the section governing council in addressing both the challenges for the AMA-SMS and the many opportunities for growth. Being part of this process has been very gratifying as my way of contributing to the AMA and all academic physician members of the AMA-SMS.

**How has your AMA leadership role helped you succeed in other aspects of your career as an academic physician?**

I assess everything I do, and I work hard to run a successful meeting. I am always looking to find out where I can improve and how I can work more effectively with different audiences. Serving on the AMA-SMS has helped and continues to help me further improve my leadership skill set.

URL: https://www.ama-assn.org/about/leadership/why-i-serve-profile-ama-leaders-med-ed-cynda-ann-johnson-md

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As medical school deans and educators, we have to be very aware of the issues in medicine and what those issues will be tomorrow as our students and trainees enter into practice. I am always scanning the lay of the land in this regard and considering how the AMA can support all physicians from day one of practice through retirement—especially academic physicians.

In addition, serving as the AMA-SMS representative at meetings of the AMA’s Accelerating Change in Medical Education initiative has helped me learn so much. I am always taking these lessons back to my school; I am always listening and thinking to myself, “How might this apply at my home institution?”

What advice would you give to a medical student or physician in training to take advantage of the opportunities the AMA offers for professional development and potential leadership roles?

I am really proud of my student group at Virginia Tech and their involvement in the AMA. I encourage their leadership activity within the AMA, but my students don’t actually need encouragement!

What would you say to your colleagues in academic medicine about why you devote your time to your profession through your service in the AMA?

The AMA is interested in medical education, and it’s putting its money where its mouth is to support innovations in medical education through its Accelerating Change in Medical Education initiative. I am extremely happy that this work is one of the AMA’s three strategic focus areas—it makes you feel you’re doing something that matters. You’re not swimming against the tide when you’re working with the AMA in medical education.

Finally, I am a strong advocate for the AMA and openly vocal about the importance of the AMA’s work in multiple settings. I always tell my colleagues, “If you haven’t experienced the modern AMA, you should give it a try.”