

Hope and Change

Andy Walker, MD FAAEM
Editor, *Common Sense*
AAEM Board of Directors



Our national elections are over, and whether you were left ecstatic, crushed, or just numb, we can all bid good riddance to another season of rudeness, deception, and manipulation. No matter which side wins or loses, I always seem to feel dirty by Election Day. In election years, November should be renamed “The Month of Compulsive Hand-Washing.” I wonder what the

Founding Fathers would think of TV and how it has changed political campaigns.

Those of us in AAEM, however, can now look forward to elections of a completely different sort. Elections in which there is almost never a bad choice. Elections in which we aren't forced to choose between the lesser of two evils. Elections in which the candidates talk more about their own qualifications and their own plans than about how flawed their opponents are. Elections in which those candidates who were friends beforehand remain friends afterward. AAEM elections — for the board of directors and the directorship of the Young Physicians Section.

My third term on the board of directors will end after the election in February. In my time on the board, I have participated in many vigorous debates and made many hard decisions. Despite over six years on the board and being outvoted many times, in every case my opponents were smart, experienced, honest, fair, and motivated only by the best interests of individual emergency physicians and the Academy that fights for them. I may have disagreed with other board members or Academy officers at times, but I never doubted or disrespected them. I believe they feel the same way about me. Unlike national or state politics, my time on the board of directors has left me feeling not only clean, but proud. Proud of my service, proud of those I worked with, and even more proud of AAEM itself.

I have written before that the worst enemy physicians have is their own sense of hopelessness. This hopelessness keeps them from joining state medical societies and specialty organizations such as AAEM, from donating to political causes they believe in, from opposing outside interference in their medical practice — whether from government, insurance companies, other corporations, or tort lawyers — and sometimes even from being passionate advocates for their patients. We think, “Lawyers control every branch of government, we'll never get fair tort reform.” Yet many states have achieved profound tort reform. Alaska has a “loser pays” rule. Other states have passed tort reform specific to emergency medicine, such as raising the burden of proof from “a preponderance of the evidence” to “clear and convincing evidence,” changing the definition of malpractice from simple negligence to gross negligence, or both. Texas even amended its constitution to make tort reform possible. The reason we find it so hard to defeat tort lawyers is that they are politically active and generously support candidates who favor them, while physicians tend to be politically inactive and reluctant to donate to candidates who favor medicine. Our



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hopelessness is a self-fulfilling prophecy! The same goes for government policies that are unfair to us, insurance companies that try to avoid paying us for work already performed, corporations and others that seek to exploit us, and hospital administrators who haven't a clue about what we do but tell us how to do it anyway. And now, in addition, we have EMRs, CPOE, and ACOs to deal with. Organizing and fighting for ourselves and our patients is now more important than ever. The rational response to bad odds isn't to surrender; it is to fight harder and try new tactics. I certainly don't think we will win every battle we fight, but I guarantee you we will lose every battle we don't fight.

So get involved. Join your state medical society. Recruit new members for AAEM. Become a leader in AAEM or in your state chapter. Or, if you don't have a state chapter, form one. The Academy's staff can walk you through the process, which is easy. Get to know your state and national legislators. Write or call them often. If you like their positions on issues you care about, give them a little money. It doesn't take much to get you noticed, especially at the state level. Educate your hospital administrators a little bit at a time, starting now, on the realities of emergency medicine so that they are open to reason when a problem comes up. Keep fighting for tort reform, no matter how many times you are defeated.

Most of all, don't give up hope. AAEM remains an ethical, uncorrupted organization of and for board certified emergency physicians and should fill you with hope. In my opinion, the Academy has done more to protect emergency medicine and move it in the right direction than any other group. David slew Goliath, and the Academy continues to battle with giants — often successfully. With your help, we can and will change the toxic environment in which many emergency physicians practice.

And don't forget to vote, either in person at the Scientific Assembly or by mailed ballot. I hope to see you at the best emergency medicine meeting in the world, the AAEM Scientific Assembly in Las Vegas. ■

Contact the Editor online at www.AAEM.org

A “Letters to the Editor” feature is now available on the Common Sense section of the AAEM website. Members must log-in with their AAEM username and password to read or post letters, or to comment on letters. If necessary, you may request that we post your letter anonymously and such requests will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis. The letters that I think are interesting, entertaining, educational, provocative, or of general interest, will be printed in Common Sense. The first of these is below, along with my reply. I hope to hear from many of you, even if you are criticizing me. I need your feedback to make Common Sense an interesting read and a good use of your time. I also want it to attract new members to the Academy. If you like something you see, let me know. If I make you mad, let me know. Especially if I make you mad. I want the letters to the editor feature to become a forum for civilized but vigorous argument, and the more vigorous the better.