

Chiropractors and the Difficulties of State Legislative Efforts

Arlan Fuhr, DC

Chiropractors have been dealing with state government since at least 1905, when we managed to get a licensing bill through both houses of the Minnesota legislature, only to have it vetoed by the governor at the request of the founder of modern chiropractic, D.D. Palmer.¹ It was a classic example of working at cross purposes; eight more years had to elapse before the first chiropractic statute was passed - in Kansas! Minnesota didn't enact a chiropractic law until 1919. We persevered elsewhere, but it took nearly 70 years to secure licensure in all 50 states.

In the past 35 years, I have been involved in the political process at the state and national level. This has ranged from an unsuccessful bid in 1970 for the senate in the North Star state; to congressional appearances in the early 1990s, for the sake of garnering federal funds for chiropractic research; to work as a legislative chairman for our state association here in Arizona. I've seen us win and lose, and I'd like to think I've learned a few things along the way. I'd like to share some of these insights.

The most serious problems chiropractors have created for themselves have come from our internal disunity and resulting tendency to speak with multiple voices. But beyond this obviously self-defeating tactic are several patterns that have proven just as debilitating. Some of the difficulties experienced by the profession at the state level derive from what I call the "bunker mentality" - that is, a tendency to work for our political desires from an exclusively egocentric point of view. There's a certain irony here: When we finally achieve internal consensus, it sometimes interferes with our ability to see anyone else's concerns. There's a natural human inclination to view the political process in simplistic, "us vs. them" terms, but this orientation will not "win friends and influence people."

In Arizona, we've had the opportunity to be included "at the table" with the lawmakers for several years. Being included in the discussions about upcoming legislation, both good and bad, has reaped many positive results. We have become known entities, even friends, of those who will vote on matters that concern us as a profession.

However, this familiarity can be compromised by the all-too-common phenomenon of turnover in the leadership of our state associations. On the one hand, we want to encourage new doctors to join their state associations and get involved in activities, including the legislative process. On the other hand, the "youngsters" will usually lack the know-how of the seasoned veterans. Why would a recent graduate be familiar with strategies for hiring the best available lobbyists, or how to manage lobbyists once they are on board? How could the newcomer to the legislative process hope to understand the culture of lobbyists, who have their own ways of working with legislators and with the lobbying community itself?

One of the most effective ways for doctors to learn the political process is by working for candidates on issues other than chiropractic. A U.S. senator once asked me this question: "If I voted against a bill that you felt were dear to the chiropractic profession, would you still help me

with my campaign?" I replied that even if he voted against my bill, I felt he was the best senatorial candidate for this country. We have been friends now for 18 years, and he was very instrumental in securing our recent Department of Defense bill. The lesson here is simple: Getting legislation passed frequently involves the cultivation of long-term relationships. The typical state lawmaker has a variety of important issues he or she must address, and all too often, we have been naive enough to think that ours is the only concern that the legislator must contend with. As a matter of fact, the novice from the state association is more likely to be a mere "blip" on the lawmaker's scope.

An extremely bright new member of our legislative committee once asked me where he could buy a book on how the legislative process worked. I told him there was no book to read, and that a lot of what he needed to learn involved common sense and a commitment to total honesty with the elected officials. The next year, one of our better lobbyists did write a short manual for freshmen legislators on how a bill started, and the steps necessary to sign it into law. But even this offered no simple recipe for the new doctor. There is no substitute for long-term observation and sustained involvement in the process - at least none that I know of. And mentoring of the greenhorn is definitely beneficial.

Among the simple, effective methods that new participants in statehouse affairs must learn are thankfulness and graciousness. Some of our lawmakers have been willing to "die on the sword" for our profession, and the simple expedient of a "thank you" note or e-mail carries considerable weight. Additionally, the newcomer must learn to view the process from a lawmaker's vantage point: he or she wants to get re-elected, and that takes money and votes. Therefore, helping to raise campaign funds is an effective way of showing a good legislator that you really appreciate what he or she has done for you. We're not talking about bribery here; it's about saying, "Thanks for a job well-done!"

Too often, we in chiropractic have not sustained the level of sophistication required to stay in the process for the long haul. We have tended to act on emotions, and have thereby "shot ourselves in the foot." Getting mad at a legislator because he or she wasn't on board with us in one situation is self-defeating in the long run. Success in political maneuvering calls for give and take, nurturing of good rapport with elected representatives, and commitment to dialogue, rather than ultimatums. As one of the better lobbyists said, "Legislation is won by inches, not miles."

We have known our victories and our defeats in state and national politics. All too often, we have been our own worst enemy, and our victories have frequently been delayed because of our difficulties in getting our act together. We already have powerful political opponents, and the idea of antagonizing lawmakers and our "natural enemies" makes no sense. So, I'll close here with a simple suggestion: Our state association leaders should study how we have helped and hurt our own causes in the past, and take deliberate steps to cultivate the political skills of those members who desire to play a role in future professional political affairs.

Reference

1. Gibbons, Russell W. Minnesota, 1905: Who killed the first chiropractic legislation? *Chiropractic History* 1993 (June);13(1):26-32.

Arlan Fuhr, DC
Phoenix, Arizona
awfuhr@aol.com

