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Advocacy Role of Professional Organizations on National Issues

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A professional association (organization) is defined as “an organization of practitioners who judge one another as professionally competent and who have banded together to perform social functions which they cannot perform in their separate capacity as individuals” (Merton, 1958; Cogan, 1955). Professional organizations and associations are crucially important for generating the energy, flow of ideas, and proactive work, needed to maintain a healthy profession.

Crisis situations such as wars, political instabilities, economic downfalls, pandemics etc, have heavily influenced the direction of a profession and thereby professional organizations. Pandemics and other crises are always opportunities for progress or regression, depending on how organizations respond to them.

Advocacy role is the cornerstone for any professional organization. This advocacy role covers a broad scope including healthcare, health system, economics, social justice and professionalism. Advocacy, motivated by moral and ethical principles, attempts to influence policies by

interaction with political, professional, economic and social systems, and institutions. Advocacy requires interaction with policy makers, administrators, professionals and the general public (Brante, 1988; Merton, 1958).

Epidemics and pandemics thrive on inequities and weak social systems. As a consequence, they could have the most severe consequences among groups that are not sufficiently protected by existing policies. COVID-19 pandemic and the current economic crises in Sri Lanka have exposed and exacerbated these social inequities, resulting in disproportionate consequences on vulnerable populations. Such inequities can only be addressed by professional advocacy based on strong principles of fairness, social justice, transparency and evidence-based science.

The critical role of advocacy with community and cross-sectorial collaborations, can and should play a significant role during national issues. Such advocacy needs to be carefully assessed, be timely and properly communicated to all stakeholders. For example, there needs to be a very clear understanding of the dynamics of a pandemic, socio-cultural situations and political complexities, before advocacy on it is contemplated.

Professional associations should stringently move away from political bias while playing a major role in political advocacy.

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In order to fulfil the advocacy role during the current crisis situation, the OPA needs to be an authority recognized by society; an expert organisation sanctioned by the broader community and the general public. This recognition can only be achieved by OPA by becoming the unbiased voice, based on a scientific approach, equity and social justice.

Advocacy needs a broader consensus. This can only be achieved by transparent, multi-stakeholder processes. This is not impossible because the potential of OPA to communicate quickly with its members and a range of organizations is very high. In this age of information technology, members can respond in a variety of ways; through phone calls, e-mail, Tweets, and Facebook™ postings. The privilege of participating in advocacy is one of the most important benefits for members of a professional association. When greater numbers unify in one voice, stronger and more powerful arguments can be advanced to achieve the desired advocacy outcomes. This approach illustrates the subtle difference between an advocacy body and a pressure group.

Advocacy needs to be timely and relevant. The process of developing advocacy statements must be transparent, with full involvement of the membership, where drafts are posted and opened for comment through multiple announcements using a variety of media and formats. All of these comments need to be analysed and deliberated upon to determine the appropriateness of their inclusion within the framework documents. As illustrated by paradoxical quotes, advocacy needs to be timely and combined with meaningful action.

"There comes a time when silence is betrayal." (Martin Luther King)

"Better remain silent, better not even think, if you are not prepared to act" (Annie Beasant)

During a crisis, media attention is invariably focused on professional organizations. This has both advantages and disadvantages. Media is essential to get the message across. The basic principles of communication apply, i.e., what is the message and is it timely and relevant? Does it contain factually correct content up to that time? What is the audience and what is the most appropriate media? Media organisations have their own agendas and there are multiple pitfalls if this reality is not clearly understood.

Use of electronic and online media calls for a different set of skills during crisis situations. Unlike in high-level, in-person meetings with top-down environment of high-level events, virtual advocacy can succeed just as well with a bottom-up approach that mobilizes the voices of broader membership and the general public. This opens up the possibility for more creative strategies that reach the intended audience through volume and frequency rather than the precision of direct, in-person approach. However, this is a double-edged sword and can lead to counter-productive results if the subtle difference between an advocacy body and a lobbying group is not clearly grasped.

Professional organizations are a crucial constituent in formulating sound public policies and strategies. OPA consists of a total membership exceeding 50,000 professionals belonging to 50+ professional institutions. They are very definitely concerned regarding the country's plight and are ready to contribute in the best possible manner to try and clear the dark clouds currently hanging over Sri Lanka

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