



A Toolkit for the Development of an Occupational Health and Medicine Professional Association

1 Background

These guidelines are intended to provide assistance in developing an occupational health (OH) and medicine society or association.

Associations are formed by individuals working in OH to facilitate their meeting and exchange of views, and their action to advance their objectives.

Creating an association will vary considerably to take account of cultural, political, legal and economic conditions of the country or region in which it will operate. For instance, in some countries annual meetings might not be physically or financially feasible and an emerging association may or may not want to adopt the same degree of formality as a more established one.

2 Activities and Projects which Associations Undertake

Associations normally are not established by government, although they may be registered or incorporated by government charter or other instrument. Associations should function independently of government and may indeed bring pressure to bear on government to enact legislation or provide financial support to advance interests of the profession.

The objectives establish the purpose for which the organization is formed and operates. These are usually made clear in the legal documentation necessary for the registration and establishment of the association with government or other authority. The objectives are general in nature leaving the detail to other documents.

Associations of professionals are generally different from bodies that officially regulate or discipline the members of the profession.

However a professional association may pursue the objectives of raising the acceptance and image of the profession and administering a code of ethics.

An association of professionals may undertake such initiatives as:

- establishing standards and providing quality assurance – for example SEQOHS (FOM) and the Corporate Health Achievement Awards (ACOEM)
- Public Awareness - associations can present conferences for their membership, sometimes held jointly with other professions to discuss issues and problems current in their practice. They may prepare and disseminate brochures and mount exhibits that explain and promote to society at large the role and benefits of OH. Some associations designate a date as an OH day or a longer period such as week or month during which time special events are promoted to draw attention to the value of OH.
- peer recognition of contributions e.g. via prizes and awards
- mentoring of those new to the field by experienced members.
- advocacy - represent the interests and needs of OH professional in lobbying governments and organizations for adequate support ¹
- education - Associations may decide on qualifications required for entry into the profession and promote the introduction of formal courses of study that enable persons to obtain these qualifications. They may, as an alternative, offer educational programs themselves. Usually, they provide training sessions and workshops to update the qualifications of professionals already at work as archivists or to introduce new technologies and areas of practice.

¹ See IOMSC Advocacy toolkit

Most associations publish a newsletter to update members on issues and communicate the activities of the executive and committees of the association. An online forum for communication between members for the pooling of knowledge, experience and ideas can be useful. Often they publish a journal that provides a forum for in-depth and intellectual treatment of aspects of OH work – credibility to be established via impact factor (and an important source of funding). Meetings are also an important means of enabling communication among members.

3 Membership

There are various reasons for having different categories of membership as the proposed classes listed below indicate. However the most significant relates to the matter of professional qualifications. In some countries the requirements for entry into the profession have been established by its members and/or government legislation. In others, practitioners may enter from a variety of backgrounds. In some areas there is an evolution toward qualifications for professionals but these have not yet been attained. In this situation provision is usually made giving non qualifying practitioners, who have been working in the field for a number of years, an opportunity to upgrade to professional status or to have membership status as long as they practice.

- Professional. Category of member possessing professional qualifications which it is necessary to define. The constitution may provide for a Professional Register, for which particular education and/or experience are required.
- General. Can include any person with an interest in the profession, or those without the qualifications of a professional. This class is used in situations where professional qualifications are not clearly established. Membership rights may be limited, for example, general members may not be eligible to serve on the executive.
- Academician. A category of membership offered to related academic disciplines
- Student. Open to OH students, intended to attract future members of the profession to membership. A lower membership fee may be offered.
- Retired. Open those who have retired from active work. Usually a reduced membership fee is required.
- Honorary. Category created to honour distinguished individuals who have made a major contribution to the profession or the association itself. It usually carries with it free membership and certain other benefits.
- International. Usually a separate category with a subscription rate different from that charged to national members because of the physical difficulties of providing services to them over long distances and of identifying their requirements.
- Individual sustaining. Members who contribute financially to the association in excess of membership fee.
- Institutional. A professional organization is ordinarily based on individual membership, however many of the services provided for personal members indirectly, and often directly, benefit institutions which employ individual members. Furthermore obtaining revenue and financial support through subscriptions and institutional membership, which is often at a higher rate, is important. This category does not usually entitle the member to full individual benefits.

Suspension of membership. A mechanism may be needed to strike from membership an individual or institution that ceases to merit membership or that delays payment of fees beyond a stated period. It is important to ensure that such action, if taken, is legal.

Generally associations are devoted to a single profession although they frequently permit membership in a general category to members of other professions

Membership fees - it is necessary to establish how membership fees are set and amended. Usually the fees are set out in a schedule of fees contained in a by-law.

5 Funding

Associations are funded in a variety of ways:

- membership fees
- grants from government on a regular basis or for a specific period of time
- revenue from annual conferences
- job advertising
- the sale of publications
- an academic journal

The source and method of funding may be mentioned in the constitution and membership fees are usually included in the by-laws or separate regulations as they are subject to frequent review. An association may want to consider ethical alignment with the society values, and the need to declare/manage conflicts of interest.

Prescription of the operating year is required for purposes of financial control and accountability, for membership purposes such as subscription, to define the length of terms of officers and the life of committees, and the reporting period. A normal operating year is annual meeting to annual meeting. However another period may be designated as operating year in order to permit the preparation of a financial report to members in advance of the annual meeting.

6 Governance, Business Activity and Democracy

Associations are normally governed by democratic processes and should be seen to be democratic – and it is important there is diversity and facilitation of inclusion, particularly in Governance and Committees. Each member should have, and be seen to have, the ability by his or her vote to influence the management and decision making processes of the association. These democratic processes are important because they enable members to arrive at a consensus within the association, and they provide authority for those who speak outside its meetings on its behalf.

It is necessary to establish the governing body of the organization that takes responsibility for the decisions made and actions taken. This body must be identifiable as an entity for the purposes of registering the organization. The form and structure of the governing body will be influenced by the political tradition of the country where it is forming, the size of the organization and other matters. Usually a larger membership meets as a General Assembly or at the annual general meeting and the governing body is an Executive (officers of the association), or a larger Council (also Board of Directors) with an Executive Committee (officers of the association) which acts on matters requiring immediate attention. Different structures are possible.

General Assembly or AGM

Comprised of all members, or all professional members, this body has sole authority for revising the constitution. It also has responsibility for the election of the Executive or Council. It normally meets once a year to take responsibility for decisions and actions of the governing body and to approve the budget and financial report.

An important activity for most associations is an annual meeting open to the entire membership to regulate the business affairs of the association and enable discussion of approaches to matters related to the association and issues facing the profession. Members plan and review their

activities and debate topics of concern. Members often take advantage of their coming together to work on tasks in sub groups and to offer education programs or training sessions.

Council (Board of Directors)

The Council represents the association and is responsible for the association's actions, activities and decisions, financial management of the association, decisions on policies, and approval for courses of action or activities. The Council guides the association's interaction with bodies external to it.

Selection of Council

Only members "in good standing" are eligible for election as council members. If an association has different categories of members, council positions may be limited to certain categories. Council members should be those who are best able to carry out the executive work of the association. Where necessary representation of geographic regions or special interests should be considered in choosing a council. If the membership is large and individuals are not well known to each other, a nominating committee can propose council members for each office after ensuring that the individuals named have the appropriate experience and abilities. Nominations at the business meeting may be permitted. The Council is elected for a set period by members entitled to vote. The election of council members ensures that they can be removed by the electorate if their performance fails to reach expected and identified standards. Council members are servants of the association and carry out its wishes. Elections need to be conducted by secret ballot and the methods by which this is done should be carefully planned and controlled. Rules for nominations, the sectors of practice or the geographical areas from which members of council are to come (if such representation needs to be ensured), set time for the election, manner in which it is to be carried out must be stipulated in by-laws. Care should be taken that all Council members are not changed at the same time so that continuity is ensured.

Executive (Officers of the association)

An executive may be created instead of a Council or as a smaller unit of the Council. It consists of the officers of the association. Training may need to be provided. The most important function is supervision of the day-to-day running of the association, which it can undertake because its membership is small. Duties of the Executive are as follows:

- To conduct the day to day and routine business of the association,
- To monitor and manage the finances
- To make decisions where action is urgently required
- To coordinate policies and the work of other sub organizations that operate with some degree of independence of action on matters related to their objectives.

Numbers and functions of officers can vary widely depending on the type of association, its aims and objectives and the legal requirements of a country or region. Selection of officers should follow the same guidelines as suggested for the selection of Council members.

Terms of Office. The length of time each officer can serve in an office or the term of office and the number of times a term can be repeated is established in the by-laws.

Signing Authority. It is necessary to delegate signing authority for financial matters and responsibility for immediate actions to one or two officers. They are ultimately responsible to the Executive and the entire Council for their actions and through them to the membership.

President (Chairperson). Normally a senior or highly respected member. Represents association on formal and substantive occasions. Supervision of day to day affairs. Chairs executive committee. Chairs annual general meeting.

- Vice President (Vice Chairperson). Assumes the responsibilities of the President in the case of his or her absence or inability to act. May be designated by the constitution or by-laws to succeed to the position of president (President-elect). Takes over duties of president in event of removal of president. May have special responsibilities assigned, such as oversight of certain committees or projects.
- Past President. This position is used by some associations to facilitate continuity, may be assigned responsibility for a task or tasks begun under his presidency or review of aspects of the organization.
- Treasurer. Manages the finances of the organization.
- Secretary. Issues notices of Annual General Meeting and elections. Responsible for minutes, correspondence, notices of meetings, running of elections. (Is combined with position of Treasurer as Secretary-Treasurer in some associations.)
- Member/s at Large (Member/s without Portfolio). No duties are specifically prescribed. Oversight of the work of a number of committees or one-time tasks may be assigned.

7 Registration

Generally incorporation or becoming registered with government or the relevant authorities is a matter of choice for associations. This will be determined by such factors as the degree of formality that is appropriate, the need for the association to receive and manage funds, and how the association wishes to handle matters related to tax issues. Associations are required to follow the conditions for registration or incorporation established by the laws of their own country or region. Often the articles essential to the formation of an organization are stipulated in this legislation.

The essential elements are sometimes contained in the instrument of incorporation or in the document named the constitution, with points relating to the structure and operations of the association left to detailed regulations. These regulations are sometimes known as by-laws and are easier to amend than the clauses of a constitution which must be revised by a more complex procedure and may be required to be filed with government. However, in some cases, all governing clauses are called by-laws and the incorporation is achieved by a separate, formal legal instrument.

Regulations

Regulations are necessary to control a number of different areas of activity and usually encompass rules necessary to regulate membership criteria, the composition of the governing body and its sub-organizations and professional qualifications. Regulations will guide the operation of elections, describe and establish machinery for the officers and committees, govern financial affairs, and provide rules for general meetings. They are normally a requirement of incorporation and are often reinforced by laws and statutes for the formal registration of such associations.

Tax Issues

Requirements relating to tax issues are established by the laws of the country in which the association is forming. The association itself is normally not profit making and will be accorded a tax free status. In some cases members may claim membership fees and annual dues as a tax deduction. As well, those who contribute to the support of an association or its projects, both members and non-members, may be entitled to a credit which can be deducted from income taxes levied by government.

AGM and meetings

An annual general meeting is desirable and is usually required by the regulations set by government for the establishment of associations that wish to incorporate. This defines the terms

of office of officers and fixes a time for communicating on the business of the organization to the membership, for discussion and approval of these matters, and for elections.

Rules governing procedures at meetings are very important to provide for the orderly conduct of business and to ensure that democratic process is followed and therefore that the decisions of the association are respected because they are seen to have the support of a majority of the membership. Details for the conduct of business are usually contained in by-laws or regulations and cover such areas as: Special meetings, Elections, Quorum, Moving of motions and Voting,

Rules of procedure.

Rules of procedures are needed to cover such matters as Executive and Committee Reports, Procedural motions, Amendment motions, Adjournment. These can be specifically developed for the association or covered by reference to standard rules of order which are available in published form from other contexts.

Dissolution

Provision should be made for the disposition of assets in the situation where an association ceases to exist. This generally takes the form of a recommendation such as their transfer to a related professional association or to a charitable cause. The last executive or individuals not directly involved in the governing of the association can be asked to take responsibility for this matter.

Records

Direction is required as to the keeping of various records and access to them, which generally should be open, including their deposit in an appropriate archival repository.

Amendments

The mechanism for amending the constitution and by-laws must be established. Often a constitution committee is established as a standing (permanent) committee of the association to undertake a review of the constitution at regular intervals to formally receive recommendations from the membership for amendment of the constitution and by-laws, and to administer their presentation to membership.

8 Committees, Task Forces, Editorial Boards, Appointed Officials, Working Parties

These are appointed to advance the business of the association, develop policies or programs, look after business, and assist in the governance of the association. They may be permanent committees, sometimes called Standing Committees that deal with ongoing matters such as constitutional review or nominations. Other committees are established to develop or oversee an initiative such as an education program. These are known as Select (or Ad Hoc) Committees. Objectives of committees, terms of reference should be established and, in some cases, a specific period set for completion of the task. Members are usually appointed for their expertise, or to represent a special interest or geographic area. It is important to have some experienced members, however, new members can be drawn into committee work to help them gain experience and non-members can also be involved to broaden the structure and bring needed skills or knowledge.

Points to be addressed in organizing committees are: number of members, areas to be represented if appropriate, and voting rights within the committee in formal situations. All members may vote. Committees may also have corresponding members and Ex officio members that is individuals who are members by virtue of their office, such as the President. In the case of ongoing committees, terms of membership should end at different times to ensure continuity. Budgets and guidelines for the expenses of committee members will need to be established. It is

important to note that committees do not carry out their work independently of the association on important matters but bring their recommendations to the Executive or Council which may decide to bring the matter before the entire membership at an annual meeting.

There are a number of positions which may be elected or appointed. These may include: Membership Officer, Publications Officer, Conference Officer and others.

Questions to Consider

- What should the structure of your Professional Association be? e.g.
Membership structure e.g. full members, associate members, retired, student?
Multidisciplinary membership e.g... Doctors, nurses etc.?
- Regulation issues – will the association create codes of practice etc.?
- How should your association registration be legally constituted issues e.g. should it be a non-profit or Company?
- How do you want decisions to be made e.g. should there be Regulations for votes on particular issues?
- How big should the board be?
- How will you get funding e.g. via membership and academic journal?