

Special Report

Survey of Iranian Members of American Academy of Ophthalmology

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Abstract

Purpose: To explore the attitude of the Iranian members towards their American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO) membership and their utilization pattern of the AAO's services

Methods: Mailed questionnaire survey to 34 current AAO members in 2005

Results: Twenty nine members (85%) participated. Almost 50% of the members judged the membership process as not being easy. About 80% of the respondents planned to maintain their AAO membership but almost 40% of the participants judged membership dues vs. benefits as high. Free subscription to Ophthalmology journal and free AAO annual meeting registration were the most valuable benefits from the members' point of view and were reported to be used most as well. Notably, the majority of the participants was interested in E-services (90%) and had browsed the AAO website (85%).

Conclusion: Cost might be a deciding factor in membership but the ease of membership process and access to the services (actual benefit utilization) seem to be much more important; there is a considerable gap between usage and potential benefits for Iranian members i.e. attending AAO annual meeting; revision of international membership fee is highly desired.

Keywords: Iranian ophthalmologist, professional association membership, American Academy of Ophthalmology, attitude towards membership, utilization of member's benefits

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Introduction

The mission of medical-professional organizations is the provision of educational services,¹ policy advice, welfare benefits, working as an interest group (on behalf of the membership or patients' populations),^{1,2} and enhancement of the integrity and ethics of the

profession.³

The American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO) is the premier ophthalmological organization in the world and the leader in the scientific as well as professional aspects of ophthalmology.

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The Iranian ophthalmic community has greatly benefited from the services and products of the AAO and some Iranian ophthalmologists maintain a membership status with it. The Iranian Society of Ophthalmology was interested to explore the attitude of the Iranian members towards their AAO membership and their utilization pattern of the AAO's services.

Methods

A mailed questionnaire survey was carried out among 34 current AAO members in 2005. Initial non-response was followed by repeat

mailings twice and phone calls; a few cases were interviewed on the phone.

Results

Of 34 current members in 2005, 29 (85%) participated in the survey. The age ranged from 34 to 78 years with a mean of 53. Three were female. Twenty eight (over 80%) of the members were university faculty members (some retired). Table 1 and Table 2 summarize the findings. The survey results were communicated to the AAO's Membership Advisory Committee.

Table 1. Attitude towards membership and some of the benefits

Membership process judged easy	15 (52%)		
Benefits vs. cost	High	Unsure	Low
	18 (62%)	6	5
Likelihood of maintaining membership	High	Likely	Unlikely
	23 (79%)	3	3
Interested in E-services	26 (90%)		

Services valued most – number in parentheses is the frequency of mentioning: Ophthalmology (20), free Annual Meeting registration (11), EyeNet magazine (6), Academy Express (5), and discounts on products (5)

Table 2. Number of members who reported using a particular benefit/service or desired to do so in the future

No	Service/Product	Used	Desired
1	Ophthalmology journal	28	27
2	EyeNet magazine	13	15
3	Academy Express e-newsletter	10	10
4	Free Annual Meeting registration	14	15
5	Access to the members only domains on the Web*	8	14
6	Discounts on programs, educational materials, etc	18	17
7	Special price for the Journal of Refractive Surgery	2	4
8	Listing in the Academy's Member Directory and Industry Guide	5	6
Educational products and materials used and/or specifically referred to			
9	Basic and Clinical Science Course series		11
10	Focal Points subscription series		7
11	Educational CDs		7
12	Clinical information/educating patients, and practice management		4

* Eighty six percent of members reported that they had browsed the AAO website.

Discussion

Currently, the AAO has approximately 7200 international members along with its 18000 American members. There are more than 1500 practicing ophthalmologists in Iran. Considering the number of members (34 in 2005), Iranian ophthalmologists' membership rate in the AAO is relatively low. This might be related to membership process; almost half of the members judged the process complicated.

The major problem is that the international credit cards are not popular/accessible and money orders are perceived bureaucratic. Therefore, it is not surprising that those who have paid their dues by credit card judged the membership process easy, and those who have gone through banks and money orders and/or used a university's faculty subsidy encountered delays and hassle.

It is not uncommon for the members of a scientific/professional society to judge membership dues vs. benefits as high²; almost 40% of our respondents did so. Several articles have evaluated the benefits of memberships and compared services with costs.^{1,4-7} Despite this judgment, about 80% of colleagues planned to maintain their AAO membership. Four members conditioned membership maintenance on a reduction in the membership fee, and another five, who did not rate benefits (vs. cost) as high, attributed it to poor access to the AAO annual meeting. It should be noted that membership is not always a necessary requirement for being benefited by a scientific/professional society services.⁸

From the survey participants' point of view, free subscription to *Ophthalmology* journal and free AAO Annual Meeting registration were the most valuable benefits, and along with the educational material and *EyeNet* magazine, they were used most as well. Notably, the majority of the participants was

interested in E-services (90%) and has browsed the AAO website (85%).

Although cost might be a deciding factor in membership, access to the services and the actual benefit utilization seem to be much more important; there is a considerable gap between usage and potential benefits. For instance, participation in the AAO annual meeting is not easy due to the difficulty of obtaining visas and the long traveling distance; improving access to the meeting for international members (especially those from developing countries) seems impractical and out of the AAO's scope. Considering this fact, a revision by the AAO of its international membership fee is highly relevant. At present, the AAO is testing an 'Affiliate Membership' category (which costs \$160) in the Philippines and India (regular membership fee is \$480). This includes free access to the electronic editions of AAO's publications but not free annual meeting registration. Depending on the results, the scheme may be offered to ophthalmologists of other nationalities.

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