The American Society for Reproductive Medicine survey: membership’s opinion counts

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The American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM) membership survey, although subject to response bias, provided clear opinions on controversial issues. A past president and the current president of ASRM comment on the value of the input to the ASRM board. (Fertil Steril 2004;82:543–4. ©2004 by American Society for Reproductive Medicine.)

We are sure that the initial reaction of American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM) members when opening the Board of Directors’ survey in 2002 was, “What? More paperwork? Another survey!” However, our members might underestimate their ability to influence the decision-making process of the Board of Directors. The survey cited here (1) provided important information regarding the opinions of the membership on a wide range of issues, including often-controversial subjects. When survey and questionnaire data are collected, the process is expected to work both ways: our constituents are expected to give input, and our leaders are expected to act upon that input. A fully informed leadership must thus be empowered by the members to take the Society forward to fulfill a clearly defined and agreed-upon mission.

The largest problem with surveys and questionnaires is the inherent bias in the results when the entire population sample does not respond. The survey represents a portion, often the most vocal but not the most representative portion, of the whole. Thus, the Board wonders whether decisions based on this portion of the group are correct for the whole organization. Some would say that as long as the entire membership was sampled, then those whose views are not represented have passive views, often an incorrect assumption. However, the leaders were elected to represent the whole, not just the vocal constituents. The leadership group must then decide how much decision-making to base on survey results.

Specifically, the ASRM Board of Directors considered the respondent sample of their survey to be representative of the whole organization. With these responses, the next strategic plan of the organization was developed. An outline of the plan was presented at the 2003 annual meeting opening ceremony by then-president Sandra Ann Carson. Financial stability, ongoing educational programs, professional advocacy, research facilitation, public visibility, and setting practice standards were the themes that the ASRM Board of Directors rendered from the survey. These themes became the focal points of the strategic plan, directing the Board to take the Society forward with a clearly determined strategy for the future.

An important example of the power of surveys is that in the ASRM survey a significant number (80%) of responders supported elective pregnancy termination and felt the Society should support this stance. In prior years, the ASRM did not have a formal policy and remained neutral in the often-emotional pro-life/pro-choice debate. This survey allowed the Board to understand that most members felt that the ASRM should not be reticent to support pregnancy termination and will consider this opinion when responding to national media requests and other lines of discussion on this subject. Another important finding was that the majority of members were against strongly
supporting preimplantation genetic diagnosis for sex selection only. Membership also did not want the organization to support reproductive cloning. These opinions would have not necessarily been intuitive to the Board of Directors, and the information provided increased the validity of the representation. Thus, the survey provided important guidance and validation of many procedures already in place and prompted the initiation of new avenues of discussion and debate.

Thus, rather than being part of another “pile of paperwork,” the ASRM 2002 survey has empowered the Board to forge ahead with a mission and agenda reviewed and reinforced by its membership. Even though all ASRM members did not respond, the survey was a valuable tool in guiding ASRM leadership; so valuable, that we urge continued membership surveillance at regular intervals, so that members will become more interested, and more members’ attitudes and desires will validate future governance of the society by its leaders.

Reference