

President's Remarks
Bradley Ruhl
AOPA Annual Business Meeting
September 11, 2008

Thank you for your support during today's elections. I'd like to offer my personal congratulations to all newly elected Executive Committee Members and Board members. Welcome Aboard!

I would now like to take a few minutes to speak with you about some of the accomplishments we've made during the last year and I would also like to share some observations about the challenges we are facing in the future as a profession.

But before doing that, I would also like to take a moment to recognize the tremendous support I have personally received during the last year from my fellow Board members; AOPA leadership, especially Tom Fise, Don DeBolt, Kathy Dodson, Tina Moran and all the staff in Alexandria; my co-workers at Otto Bock HealthCare and most of all from my family; in particular, my wife Lynn. Lynn has been exceptionally tolerant and supportive of my activities during the last 12 months and although I'm not quite finished with my commitment as President, (and knowing that there's one more year left on the commitment as Immediate Past President), I am profoundly appreciative of her support and honestly don't believe I could have gone through this without her. So from the bottom of my heart, I thank you Lynn and I love you very much!

One year ago I stood before you and described what I felt were the top priorities facing AOPA during the year of my Presidency. Those priorities were:

- Setting a strong legislative agenda for the future.
- Advancing the strategic plan first introduced 4 years ago in Sun River, Oregon. The plan that became known as the "Sun River Initiatives".
- And lastly: Doing everything I could to make sure that AOPA was listening and responding to members needs.

I also stated that I would bring a list, however short or long, to this year's meeting and report back to you what we've been able to accomplish during the last 12 months. Lucky for you this afternoon, the list short, but meaningful! I hope you'll agree.

During fiscal year 2008, we nearly quadrupled AOPA's lobbying budget in the strong belief that if there's one thing that AOPA must do well, it is to effectively illustrate and then communicate our message to and gain support from members of Congress for the issues that are facing our profession. This effort was really put to the test in early June when, with little notice, we became aware of a major push from the leaders within the HME/DME industry to delay the implementation of competitive bidding in exchange for a dramatic cut in the DMEPOS reimbursement rates.

Earlier in the year, we had received the very good news that orthotics would NOT be included in competitive bidding. But then, not long afterwards, we had to face the very real threat that O&P would be included in the dramatic cut in reimbursement that would have to be made in order to offset the savings that had to be achieved so that Congress could approve the delay. Faced with this threat we took action and through the strong and quick-acting efforts of leaders within our profession, together with the strong and quick-acting efforts of our lobbying firm, we were successful in our efforts to NOT be included in those cuts.

In fact, the ultimate decision by Congress was to cut the fee schedule for only those product segments that had been previously competitively bid. We're talking about what could have been an overnight, at least 10% cut across the board in the Medicare fee schedule. In actuality, we feared that it could have been much worse.

What would we do with a double digit reduction in our fee schedule? How would we react? How would you manage your business in the face of such a dramatic reduction? Fellow members, I have to tell you, although we dodged a bullet this year, we are not out of the woods and our work is not done. Therefore, in July this of this year, your Board of Directors approved another significant increase in our lobbying budget for fiscal year 2009 to the highest level ever in our history.

In addition to this, we will be looking increasingly to the O&P Political Action Committee for its assistance in these volatile and challenging political times. Shortly, you will hear from Tom Watson, the chairman of our PAC, about the current state of our PAC and you can judge for yourself if you believe this is an acceptable position for us to be in with regard to the threats in reimbursement and government regulations we will face in 2009 and beyond.

The next priority set last year was to make sure that we did everything we could to help advance our efforts in supporting the plans that were developed four years ago in Sun River. What then became known as the "Sun River Initiatives" was soon followed by our "O&P Leadership Conference" which was held in Chicago in the late fall of 2006. These two events laid the foundation for our current plans which were refined during the last 9 or 10 months as we surveyed membership, again, and began to put together a new plan that was discussed in detail at this morning's kick-off to our business education program that we titled a "Glimpse into the Future". I know that many of you attended that program, but for those of you that couldn't be there, I'd like to give you a brief overview of where we're headed.

You know, strategic planning is hard work and for those of you that go through it, you know exactly what I mean.

Based completely on the results of the membership survey that was conducted at the very end of last year, a survey that attained the highest level of responses from any survey conducted in recent memory, we identified 11 separate initiatives that address the major concerns, issues and needs of our membership. Though some of these initiatives actually

overlap or are at the very least, connected to each other, we have identified them separately in order to bring the necessary focus each deserves. I will not go over each of them in detail here today, but as I said, I would like to give you a brief overview.

Without a doubt, the survey respondents demanded that AOPA play the leading role in creating and shaping our vision for the future of the O&P profession in the United States. We need make sure that AOPA stays focused on doing everything possible to ensure that our voice is strongly heard regarding future changes in Medicare reimbursement and the linking of service and quality to payment.

We need AOPA to take a stronger position with regard to the training of future practitioners and to ensure that those future practitioners have the skills that they will need in order to practice in a totally different environment than the one we've thrived on in the past.

Members want AOPA to make a strong commitment in establishing the research agenda that is so desperately needed in order to prove the efficacy of our interventions and treatment protocols we put in place in order to provide superior patient care and quality clinical outcomes. Payers are demanding it and members are demanding that AOPA respond.

AOPA must dedicate our energies, talents and resources to identifying future revenue generating activities that members must explore in order to expand their scope of practice, should they choose to do so. In making that choice, you must realize that if you do not want to change your scope of practice, then you better be prepared to operate your business in the most cost effective, efficient manner possible. Your survival will depend on it. And AOPA must take the lead here as well. Our current payment system is truly at great risk. The current spending by the federal government to support Medicare is simply not sustainable. With a new President and a new Congress we must be prepared to face dramatic changes in our reimbursement system during the next few years. This will happen much more quickly than any of us desire; but we must take steps now to prepare ourselves for these changes.

An additional major objective identified by our AOPA members was that AOPA must make a major commitment with regard to communicating our message. We have a great story to tell and our effort to raise greater awareness of the uniqueness of our field and the tremendous impact we can have in improving people's lives is undeniable. The fact that in many cases we can help people get off the public dole and back into a meaningful job, where they can once again become a "tax payer" instead of a "tax beneficiary", is a tremendous story. Let's face it, improving the quality of life for disabled people is our one and only purpose and it must remain our focus. We need to tell our story and AOPA is prepared to do so. In fact, we have committed nearly half a million dollars in this and next year to begin to create and execute on a communications and public relations plan, the likes of which have never been seen in our profession before.

In the end, we have grouped all of the initiatives into three primary “Action Areas” we have defined as:

- Protect (Initiatives that are focused on holding and strengthening our current position in the market)
- Provide (Initiatives that are focused on helping to develop the tools that members will need to operate successfully in the future)
- Promote (Initiatives that are focused on influencing policymakers and a comprehensive communications plan that tells our story.)

The fact that these three areas happen to align themselves perfectly with the three primary missions AOPA has of being a Critical Resource for members, a Collaboration Leader within the profession and an Influential Advocate further illustrates just how aligned we are in our thinking and our objectives right now.

The survey results made it absolutely clear that members expect a lot more out of AOPA. What really became evident to AOPA leadership is that AOPA must change as an association in order to meet the demands of the future. The idea that our association is charged with the mission of charting the course as a proactive force in advancing the entire field is not new. But now more than ever, AOPA must change in the best interests of its members; as told to us by our members...and we will.

The last priority for this year was to make sure that AOPA was listening and responding to members needs. As I’ve just highlighted for you, I honestly believe that AOPA is now embarking on a whole new course that will truly lay the ground work for the celebration of our 100th year anniversary in 2017. Listening to and responding to members needs is the fundamental mission to which AOPA leadership is committed. This will not always be an easy path and there will be difficult choices and decisions to make in the years ahead.

In closing, I would like to challenge each one of you here today to join us in this commitment; a commitment that will ensure the vitality and viability of our future as a profession. AOPA is doing everything it can, but in the end, we as members are the ones who will decide that future. We can choose to use or not use the tools, the advice and the assistance that AOPA offers. You know we’ve made incredible progress during the last 91 years and with your support, I know that we can blaze the right trail that sets our course for the next 91 years.

Thank you very much for your time and thank you for allowing me the opportunity to work on your behalf as President of AOPA during this last year. It has been an honor.

And now I would like to ask Brian Gustin to come forward.