

o.d. to o.d.

BY WALTER D. WEST, O.D., F.A.A.O.
Chief Optometric Editor

Doctor,
An optometrist in the
U.S. Senate would help
keep optometry strong.

Has Optometry Fallen Victim to its Own Success?

Are the qualities that we gained in past legislative battles — strength, unity and sense of purpose — beginning to fade?

As I reflect on the efforts of organized ophthalmology today to limit the scope of optometry, I think back to 1987. Optometrists in the state of Tennessee celebrated the passing of legislation that allowed those certified to begin using an unlimited formulary to treat our patients medically. Similar celebrations have taken place in all 50 states.

Optometrists have the privilege to practice at a higher level than ever before. I remember the day I received the word that our state's legislation had passed and began to think about how strong we had collectively become with the guidance of our executive director, Gary Odom.

Assessing our strength

Looking back at the days before our legislation passed, I'll never forget the time spent meeting with legislators and writing checks to the Political Action Committee (PAC). And it made me wonder: Was the day our legislation passed the day that optometry in Tennessee became its strongest? Or was it actually the day that our strength first began to fade?

I refer to my experience and observations in Tennessee not to single out my home state, but rather to identify a pattern that seems to have manifested itself in all of the 50 states, as well as on a national level. Did the

PAC contributions have fallen dramatically over the years while earnings from individual optometrists continue to rise.

strength, unity, influence and sense of purpose — the qualities that we gained in those days of legislative battles — fall victim to the success that we all shared?

Misperceptions of success

Perhaps the problem is rooted in the misperception that success was defined by our accomplishment rather than by the "accomplishing." Or perhaps optometrists perceived that the expansion of our scope of practice was the end goal that relieved us of further action.

I would argue that expanding the scope of practice and the individual certification were merely intermediate goals on the path to providing our patients the scope of care that we knew we were capable of providing as healthcare professionals.

In that regard, our time for action is not over. One of the current challenges that all optometrists face is finding patients to serve with our expanded scope and certification. On an offensive front, we must work to

eliminate our exclusion from provider panels so that we have access to patients. The mounting efforts by ophthalmology to legislatively reduce our existing scope of practice seems to be our constant challenge on a defensive front.

Does optometry have the continued resources to meet these challenges? If support of lobbying efforts is any indication, then unfortunately, the answer is not as positive as it should be. PAC contributions have fallen dramatically over the years while at the same time, earnings by individual optometrists have continued to rise.

These offensive and defensive challenges are realities that we must deal with — optometrists must come together, shoulder to shoulder once again in an effort to move our profession forward. I don't believe this is bad for optometry but rather good. Once again we as optometrists are required to focus on accomplishing rather than what we have accomplished. **OM**