



The Pharos: 84 years of advancing humanism in medicine

Since its first issue, *The Pharos* has been a leading scholarly journal that represents medicine and humanities.² Ernest S. Moore, MD (AQA, University of Illinois College of Medicine, 1902, Charter Member), published “The Early Days of Alpha Omega Alpha” in *The Pharos* in May 1944, wherein he introduced the context under which Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society was established.

The medical educational pot was boiling briskly in 1900. Fundamental changes in medical education had begun to make themselves felt. Many schools had been, or still were, commercial ventures. Admission requirements were elastic; instruction largely by lectures and text-book study; laboratories generally inadequate, sometimes none.

The medical students were...a primitive group. They were emotionally hair-trigger men, quick to resent an affront, and prompt to avenge an injury. Their behavior in halls and classrooms was rough and boorish. They were loyal to their friends and to each other. Class spirit ran high, and class clashes, often of riotous proportions, were of weekly occurrence. They respected neither authority nor property. Whenever a class was lined up for supplies for a class period, more or less roughhousing was present.³

Moore went on to explain that the founders of AQA defined the duties of AQA members as:

...to foster the scientific and philosophical features of the medical profession; to look beyond self to the welfare of the profession and of the public; to cultivate social mindedness, as well as an individualistic attitude toward responsibilities; to show respect for colleagues, especially for elders and teachers; to foster research; and in all ways to ennoble the profession of medicine and advance it in public opinion.⁴

In 1937, Bierring, as the President of AQA at the time, decided that in response to the AQA core tenet of “supporting the ideals of humanism,” the society should develop a peer-reviewed journal that would focus on humanism in medicine – humanness, medical history, ethics, literature, art, poetry, music, language, philosophy, and culture.

The first issue of *The Pharos* was published in 1938 and made available at no cost to all members of AQA

GREETINGS

The Directors of Alpha Omega Alpha Society in presenting to the members of this first number of The Pharos bespeak for it a kindly reception and express the hope that it will serve as a “Beacon” and worthy exponent of the aims and purposes of our society.

There has been a demand for a medium of exchange through which the views of individuals, reports from chapters, and other interesting information could be made available to the entire membership.

The Pharos will be published semi-annually in the fall and the spring.

The society is most fortunate in having Mrs. William W. Root as managing editor. Through many years of association with the Founder of Alpha Omega Alpha, her lamented husband, she has gained an intimate knowledge of the organization of the society and familiarity with all its activities throughout its entire existence that ensures the success of this new venture.

—Walter L. Bierring, AQA president, 1938¹

Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society (AQA) first published *The Pharos* in January 1938. The inaugural greeting was from Walter L. Bierring (AQA, University of Iowa Roy J. and Lucille A. Carver College of Medicine, 1921, Alumunus), then-President of AQA. The first page contained the AQA key, recognition of founder William W. Root, MD, and the AQA motto, “Be Worthy to Serve the Suffering.”

and interested members of the general public. Named after the Pharos lighthouse of Alexandria, the journal was to serve as a “Beacon” and worthy exponent of the aims and purposes of the society. The Pharos first featured the lighthouse of Alexandria on the cover in 1949.⁵ The Pharos lighthouse of Alexandria was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world built in Alexandria, Egypt in 279 B.C. The island of Pharos was a strip of white, sparkling, calcareous stone that was washed all around by the sea. It had a causeway connecting the island to the delta.

In addition, the Library of Alexandria was considered a bastion of knowledge; a universal library. Both the Pharos and the Library led the way as beacons of light and knowledge.

Alexander the Great succeeded his father, Philip II, to the throne of the Kingdom of Macedon at the age of 20. He conquered countries throughout Asia and Northern Africa, and created the largest empire of the ancient world. He was undefeated in battle.

He advanced on Egypt in 332 B.C., where he was considered a liberator, and deified as the King of Egypt. Alexander founded 20 cities that have his name, most East of the Tigris. The first, and greatest, was Alexandria, Egypt, in 331 B.C. According to one rendition, Homer appeared to Alexander in a dream and recited lines from the *Odyssey* about the island of Pharos. Plutarch then wrote:

Alexander left his bed and went to Pharos, which at that time was an island lying slightly south of the Canopic mouth of the Nile....He no sooner cast his eyes upon the place than he perceived the advantages of the site. It was a tongue of land, not unlike an isthmus, whose breadth was proportional to its length. On one side it had a great lake and on the other the sea, which there formed a capacious harbour.⁶

Alexandria’s harbor held more ships than any other port in the world, was a center of world commerce, and was the capital of Egypt for more than 1,000 years. Alexander observed that the harbor near the island of Pharos provided the only safe anchorage along the Mediterranean coastline. There was no typical landmark, and numerous treacherous limestone reefs near the shore. A beacon for incoming ships was needed. Thus, he ordered the world’s first lighthouse—*The Pharos*—be designed and built.

Construction of *The Pharos* was begun by Ptolemy I in 299 B.C., and finished by his son, Ptolemy II Philadelphus, in 279 B.C. The tower was designed and built by the architect Sostratos, who used large blocks of stone made up of three stages. A lower, square section 240 feet by 100 feet,

sat on a stone platform with a central core and a long ramp leading to a door. The middle section was an octagonal tower, and a towering cylindrical section topped off the lighthouse. All totaled, the Pharos was 450 feet tall.

On the top, there was an open cupola where a continuous fire burned. A large, curved mirror, thought to be of polished bronze, was used to project the fire’s light into a beam that reflected sunlight during the day. The light was reported to be visible day and night, as far as 29 miles away.

The Pharos was the first lighthouse in the world, and the highest man-made structure in the world, other than the great pyramid at Giza. It became the model for other lighthouses for centuries, and remained in use for 1,500 years.⁷

AΩA’s beacon

The November 1949 issue of *The Pharos* stated, “It seems appropriate to adopt the ‘Ancient Beacon of the Mediterranean’ as the Pharos of our Society, a fitting symbol of the spirit and purposes of Alpha Omega Alpha.”

It was with great forethought and foresight that AΩA’s journal, *The Pharos*, took its name from the ancient beacon of the Mediterranean. Like the great light that once shone forth at Alexandria demonstrating light, truth, knowledge, learning, wisdom, worthiness, duty, hope, strength, scholarship, vigilance, integrity, reason, and clarity of vision, so does *The Pharos* serve as a beacon for the AΩA Honor Medical Society and its members, the profession of medicine, the care of the suffering, and humanism and the humanities.

It is with this spirit that AΩA has continued to produce *The Pharos* for 84 years, and on this, the 120th anniversary of AΩA, it will continue to guide the future of medicine, and will shine well into the future.

References:

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4. Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society, AΩA’s History. Accessed at <http://alphaomegalpha.org/history.html>.
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6. Harris WV, Ruffini G, editors. *Ancient Alexandria between Egypt and Greece.* Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition. Boston: Brill; 2004.
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