

Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society and *The Pharos*: *Continuing to burn bright and enlighten*

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Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society (AΩA) began in 1902 at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Chicago, now the University of Illinois College of Medicine. This was the pre-Flexner era, and the practice of medicine relied mostly on tradition and was largely empirical. The sciences basic to medicine—anatomy, biology, physiology, chemistry—were advancing rapidly, but only a few medical schools had faculty qualified to teach the new evolving theory and science of medicine.

The number of medical schools had risen to 154 and the enrollment of medical students increased to nearly 25,000.¹ However, medical education was poorly structured, and medical students were ill-prepared academically. Many students had not graduated from high school or attended a college or university prior to entering medical school. Medical school faculty were frequently unqualified and ill-equipped to teach a scientifically oriented curriculum, and numerous doctors questioned the value of research in medicine and health care. Standards were virtually nonexistent. Most medical schools were proprietary and not associated with a university, and some physicians found that running and operating a small independent medical school could be a financially profitable pursuit.

AΩA's founder was 35-year-old medical student William Webster Root, MD (AΩA, University of Illinois College of Medicine, 1902). Root was more experienced and better educated than most medical students at that time. He graduated from Cornell University with a Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry in 1890. He then completed two years of graduate work at Cornell while teaching chemistry, physics, and biology. He later entered graduate school at the University of Chicago and obtained a master's degree in chemistry. During that time, he also taught sciences at the Chicago Manual Training School.²

Root was appalled by the lack of interest in academic achievement and professional values shown by medical faculty and students as well as by their poor conduct and dishonesty. Root first discussed the idea of forming an honor medical fraternity with classmates in July of 1902. He wrote, "It was the lack of interest in scholarly attainment among medical students that led to AΩA."³

Root and 13 of his like-minded medical school classmates decided to take action. They proposed a new organization modeled after Phi Beta Kappa and decreed that membership was to be based on both scholarly achievement and professional conduct.² The duties of AΩA members would be:

To foster the scientific and philosophical features of the medical profession; to look beyond oneself to the welfare of the profession and of the public; to cultivate social mindedness, as well as an individualistic attitude toward responsibility; to show respect for colleagues, especially for elders and teachers; and to foster research and in all ways to ennoble the profession of medicine and advance it in the public opinion. It is equally a duty to avoid that which is unworthy, including the commercial spirit and all practices injurious to the welfare of patients, the public, and profession.⁴

A classmate and one of the original members of AΩA, Ernest Moore, MD (AΩA, University of Illinois School of Medicine, 1902), later wrote:

In the summer of 1902, I was sitting on the steps of the old College building. It was almost time to start the grind when Root came out of the building and sat down beside me to tell me about a plan he had to organize a medical honor fraternity patterned after the likes of Phi Beta Kappa. I was convinced of Root's ideas and Root provided a list of men to be invited to membership.^{4,5}

Moore continued,

Honesty was conspicuously absent, and behavior in the halls and classrooms was rough and boorish, while articles of any value would be sure to remain where they were placed in the medical building only by nailing them securely.^{4,5}

He also noted that the faculty were only interested in training new practitioners and “the heads of departments were selected by who could buy substantial blocks of stock.”^{4,5} Schools could thus receive income from students who were poorly prepared for medical school.

Root presented his proposal for the new society to his fellow students on August 25, 1902.^{3,4} Plans moved quickly and on September 27, 1902, 28 students met at the Bismark Hotel in Chicago to ratify

a constitution drafted by Root and to induct the society’s original members.^{3,4} In 1903, the state of Illinois granted the Charter and the Articles of Incorporation for the Alpha Omega Alpha Medical Honor Fraternity. Remarkably for the time, the original charter clearly stated that race, color, creed, gender, and social standing should never be barriers to membership.⁶

Root transferred to Rush Medical College and graduated in 1904. Upon graduation, he practiced medicine for four years in Parker, Indiana. He then began conducting research first at the Parke-Davis Company in Detroit, Michigan, before moving on to HKY Mulford laboratories in Philadelphia. Following his years of research, Root moved and started a medical practice in Slaterville Springs, New York. At the outbreak of World War I, he joined the Army as a First Lieutenant in the Medical Reserve Corps, serving from 1913–1917.

Root’s wife, Anna Conant Bronson Root, graduated from Cornell University in 1893, and taught French and German in secondary schools and at the Women’s College of Brown University. Her father was the founder and first president of Colby College. With her strong academic background, she was a staunch supporter of AΩA.² For 30 years, Root served as the Secretary-Treasurer (now Executive Director) of AΩA, working from his home with his wife’s, children’s, and grandchildren’s support to promote new chapters in the best medical schools in the country. Anna served as Assistant Secretary-Treasurer.²

Between 1904 and 1913, under the leadership of Root and AΩA’s first Board President, Winfield Scott Hall, MD (AΩA, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, 1903), head of the Department of Physiology of the School of Medicine at Northwestern University, the society rapidly established new chapters in medical schools throughout the East Coast and Midwest. Like Root, Hall was a crusader determined to bring scientifically-minded teaching to Northwestern.³

Hall and Root recruited another physiologist from the faculty of Harvard Medical School, Walter B. Cannon, MD (AΩA, Harvard Medical School, 1906), to be the Board’s Vice President of AΩA. Cannon was largely responsible for promoting and vetting new chapter applications with one primary standard: new chapters should be from the

best medical schools in the country.³ This was difficult, since no standard criteria for medical schools existed at the time, and they often rejected applications from proprietary medical schools.³

“Be worthy to serve the suffering.”

—AΩA motto originally established by Root and his colleagues in 1902

AΩA mission

AΩA is dedicated to the belief that in the profession of medicine we will improve care for all by:

- Recognizing high educational achievement;
- Honoring gifted teaching;
- Encouraging the development of leaders in academia and the community;
- Supporting the ideals of humanism; and
- Promoting service to others

In 1909, the AΩA Constitution was revised to allow election of limited numbers of house staff, faculty, and alumni, as well as honorary members “who have gained wide recognition through original research, or in administration, and who conform to the requirements for undergraduates.”⁵

Hall was followed by Russell Burton Opitz, MD (AΩA, Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and

Surgeons, 1907), of Columbia, who served as Board President from 1913 to 1918; and John L. Heffron, MD, (AQA, SUNY Upstate Medical University College of Medicine, 1911), Dean of Syracuse University who served from 1918 to 1924.³ In 1935, Walter L. Bierring, MD (University of Iowa Roy J. and Lucille A. Carver College of Medicine, 1921), from the University of Iowa, began serving AQA as President/Executive Director, a role he held for 26 years until his death in 1961.³

In 1938, Bierring launched *The Pharos* as a testament to the core tenants of AQA.⁷ He named the journal after the great Pharos lighthouse in Alexandria, one of the seven wonders of the world.

It was with great forethought and foresight that the journal was named after this ancient beacon signifying light, truth, knowledge, learning, wisdom, worthiness, duty, hope, strength, scholarship, vigilance, integrity, reason, and clarity of vision.

The Pharos now serves as a beacon for the medical humanities—humanness, medical history, ethics, literature, law, politics, art, poetry, music, language, philosophy, and culture. One of the goals of *The Pharos* is to continue to guide the future of medicine and shine well into the future. Bierring wrote, “*The Pharos*, will serve as a ‘Beacon’ and worthy exponent of the aims and purposes of our society.”⁷

Following Dr. Bierring’s death, Robert J. Glaser, MD (AQA, Harvard Medical School, 1953), became Executive Director of the Society and Editor of *The Pharos*, and served from 1962–1997. He grew up in St. Louis and attended public schools through high school. He attended Harvard College and then Harvard Medical School, graduating magna cum laude in 1943. He interned at Barnes Hospital in St. Louis, served as an assistant resident at Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, and then finished residency training in internal medicine at Barnes Hospital. He met medical student Helen Hofsommer, who became his wife.⁸

Glaser was elected to membership in AQA as an alumni member of Harvard in 1953. He was then a National Research Council Fellow at Washington University Medical School focusing on streptococcal infection and publishing regularly. He rose to

positions as Associate Professor of Medicine, Chief of Rheumatology, and Associate Dean. He served on the faculty at Washington University from 1945–1957.⁸ He then served as the Dean of the University of Colorado School of Medicine from 1957–1962, where, in collaboration and leadership with then Mayor of Denver, Quigg Newton, built a new health sciences center campus on 42 acres in Denver near the Denver Veterans Affairs Hospital and Rose Hospital, on the corner of Colorado Boulevard and 9th Avenue.⁸

He returned to Boston in 1963 and served as President of the Affiliated Hospital Center working to merge the

Harvard-affiliated hospitals. In 1965, he was appointed and served as the Vice President for Medical Affairs and Dean of the Stanford University School of Medicine, where, over the next five years, he played a central role in the development of the Stanford Hospital and Stanford University School of Medicine. In 1968, he was named Acting President of Stanford University on the

retirement of the incumbent. During this time, he moved the National Office of AQA to Palo Alto, California.⁸

After leaving Stanford, in addition to continuing his roles at AQA, Glaser led the Commonwealth Fund, The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and the Lucille P. Markey Charitable Trust. He was also involved nationally in medical education and health care with the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) and the National Advisory Committee on Higher Education.

He was a founding member of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Medicine, and received many awards in his lifetime, including the Abraham Flexner Medal for Distinguished Service to Medical Education, the Stearns Award for Lifetime Achievement in Medicine from the New York Academy of Medicine, and the Harvard Medal for Distinguished Service. The AQA Distinguished Teacher Award is named for him.⁸

Following Glaser’s retirement in 1997, Edward D. Harris, Jr., MD (AQA, Harvard Medical School, 1962), became Executive Secretary of AQA. He further expanded the AQA programs and awards and

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continued the development and expansion of *The Pharos*. Harris died in 2010.⁹

I was elected as a member of AΩA at the University of Southern California, now the Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California. Being elected as a member of AΩA was one of the major accomplishments and honors in my career and in my lifetime. My framed Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society certificate has always been proudly displayed in my office.

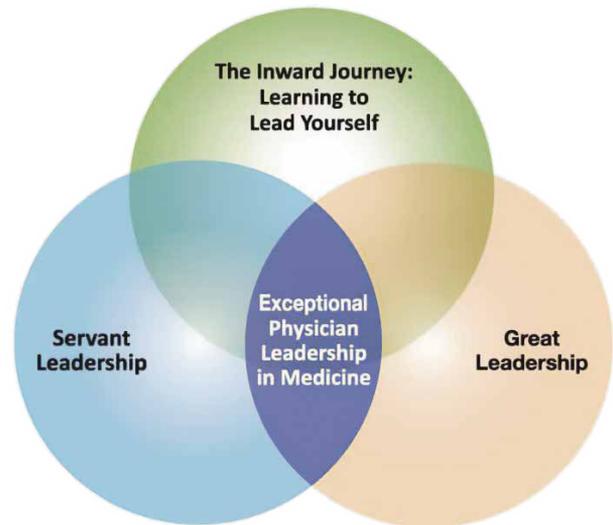
I have served in many positions including: Captain U.S. Air Force; chief resident; endocrine fellow; clinician; teacher; investigator; Assistant and Associate Professor of Medicine at the University of Chicago; Professor of Medicine; Head Division of General Internal Medicine, Vice Chairman Department of Medicine, and Executive Vice Chancellor at the University of the Colorado School of Medicine; Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the System Graduate School at the University of Colorado; Chancellor at the University of Colorado Boulder; Director of the Center for Health Policy at University of Colorado Hospital; and Director for Mentored Scholarly Requirement at the University of Colorado School of Medicine. In addition, I was actively involved in the move of the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center to the Fitzsimons Army Hospital campus. The move included the transfer of 302 acres from the U.S. Army to the University, and a partnership with the city of Aurora.

I served on the Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society Board of Directors from 1990 to 1997 and worked closely with Glaser, who was a mentor and who supported initiatives in developing academic general internal medicine at the University of Colorado School of Medicine through his work at the Kaiser Family Foundation.

In the fall of 2010, I was appointed Executive Director of AΩA and Editor of *The Pharos*. I met regularly with Glaser and consulted with him on the operational challenges and management strategies of AΩA. As Executive Director, I ensured that AΩA continued to evaluate and approve new AΩA Chapters in medical schools across the country, and provide AΩA financial support for the AΩA annual Visiting Professorships, and the AΩA faculty, medical student, and Chapter awards each year.

In 2014, the AΩA Board of Directors established the AΩA Fellow in Leadership Program, which provides a fellowship opportunity and funding for three leadership

A commitment to physician leadership



Leadership in medicine, medical education, and health care is more complex in the 21st century than ever before. Because of their unique knowledge of the practice of medicine, and understanding of medicine's core professional values, AΩA members are ideally suited to serve as leaders.

fellows each year. AΩA Fellows spend one year honing their leadership skills and expanding their knowledge of leading and leadership. The five essential components of the AΩA Fellow in Leadership are: self-examination through the "inward journey," which focuses on leading from within; a structured curriculum concentrated on topics related to leadership including an understanding of the relationship between leadership and management; mentors and mentoring; experiential learning to broaden the perspective and understanding of leadership as it relates to medicine and health care; and team-based learning anchored in the development of communities of practice.

Since its inception the program has graduated 36 current and future physician leaders. In 2016, AΩA established the annual Robert H. Moser Essay Award for the top essay highlighting the life of a physician who enriched the world of medicine. The following year, AΩA established the Medical Student Service Leadership Project Grant for a Service Leadership Project for underserved populations that includes demonstrated leadership opportunities and a leadership curriculum

component for students. The society continued, and continues today, its work with the AAMC to annually recognize outstanding medical school faculty with the Robert J. Glaser Distinguished Teacher Awards.

In 2018, AΩA transformed its Professionalism Award to recognize and honor faculty and institutions for best practices in medical professionalism education. The award accompanied AΩA's efforts to recognize and promote professionalism through biennial retreats and monographs. To date, five monographs

have been published and disseminated free of charge to nearly 100,000 interested educators and physicians. The monographs are also available on the AΩA website at alphaomegaalpha.org/monographs.

In 2023, I informed the Board that I would like to step back from my role as Executive Director of AΩA. I suggested to the Board that the roles of Executive Director and Editor of *The Pharos* had grown untenable for just one person and encouraged them to make them two separate jobs.

Bradley E. Barth, MD, MSLOD (AΩA, University of Kansas School of Medicine, 1994), was hired as the new AΩA Executive Director effective December 1, 2023. It has been my great pleasure to work closely with Dr. Barth over the past two years watching him flourish in this role.

Upon my retirement as Executive Director in October 2023, the Board of Directors honored me by renaming the society's leadership program the Richard L. Byyny Fellow in Leadership Program.

I have been honored to lead AΩA and *The Pharos*. Much like I handed the baton to Dr. Barth in 2023, I am now ready to pass on the torch of the lighthouse of *The Pharos* to a new Editor, Paul Haidet, MD, MPH (AΩA, Penn State College of Medicine, 1991).

AΩA now boasts a membership of 219,788 members, which includes 59 Nobel Prize laureates, 13 U.S. Surgeons General, and more than 75 percent of medical school deans. AΩA members demonstrate admirable character, honesty, trustworthiness, educational achievement, ethical behavior, professionalism, expertise, caring, knowledge, scholarship, servant leadership,

compassion, empathy, altruism, and proficiency in the doctor-patient relationship.

For 123 years, AΩA has been dependable, tenacious, and committed to ensuring the highest standards of caring, ethics, professionalism, and leadership in medicine with an ongoing passion to promote the importance of the humanities in medicine. I am confident that the new leadership of AΩA—Drs. Barth and Haidet—much like their esteemed predecessors, will ensure the continued evolution and prestigiousness of AΩA and *The Pharos* well into the future.

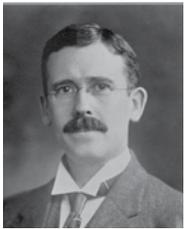
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Stewards of excellence:

A timeline of leadership in Alpha Omega Alpha and *The Pharos*



William Webster Root, MD
(AQA, University of Illinois College of Medicine, 1902) Founder of AQA; Secretary-Treasurer (Executive Director)



Ernest Moore, MD
(AQA, University of Illinois College of Medicine, 1902) Founding Member



Winfield Scott Hall, MD
(AQA, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, 1903) Board President (1904–1913)



Walter B. Cannon, MD
(AQA, Harvard Medical School, 1906) Board Vice President



Russell Burton Opitz, MD
(AQA, Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons, 1907) Board President (1913–1918)



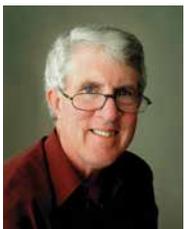
John L. Heffron, MD
(AQA, SUNY Upstate Medical University College of Medicine, 1911) Board President (1918–1924)



Walter L. Bierring, MD
(AQA, University of Iowa Roy J. and Lucille A. Carver College of Medicine, 1921) President (1935–1961); Executive Director and Editor of *The Pharos* (1938)



Robert J. Glaser, MD
(AQA, Harvard Medical School, 1953) Executive Director and Editor of *The Pharos* (1962–1997)



Edward D. Harris, Jr., MD
(AQA, Harvard Medical School, 1962) Executive Director and Editor of *The Pharos* (1997–2010)



Richard L. Bynny, MD
(AQA, University of Southern California, 1964) Executive Director of AQA (2010–2023) and Editor of *The Pharos* (2010–2026)



Bradley E. Barth, MD, MSLOD
(AQA, University of Kansas School of Medicine, 1994) Executive Director of AQA (2023–present)



Paul Haidet, MD, MPH
(AQA, Penn State College of Medicine, 1991) Editor of *The Pharos* (2026)

The Pharos through the years

From the inaugural issue in 1938 (pictured below) to today, these covers reflect changing times and enduring values, capturing how medicine has evolved while AΩA's commitment to humanity has remained constant.

