

# **Inaugural Address**

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## **President, American Optometric Association**

Mr. Speaker, delegates, members of the Board of Trustees, and honored guests. I am honored and humbled to stand before you today as the 88<sup>th</sup> president of the American Optometric Association.

In the 1986 film "Top Gun," Tom Cruise plays Maverick, a brash but troubled young naval aviator. The opening scene graphically shows his F-14 Tomcat being catapulted off a rolling aircraft carrier deck to the tune of Kenny Loggins singing "Danger Zone."

Life is full of zones; and although few of us would relish a catapult shot off of a carrier deck, instead we prefer another zone -- our comfort zone.

Professionally we have our comfort zones. Most of us see patients on a regular basis. Our habits and preferences are evident each and every day. We start hours at a certain time, we take our breaks at a certain time, and for the most part we work in an office setting with familiar surroundings. Our staff, our offices and even the instrumentation layout in each room that we use for patient care is part of our familiar routine.

Even our protocols in the office have a comfort zone: the order of our steps taken to examine and treat patients and even the position of our fundus lenses, occluders and light switch have that familiarity about them. They help keep us in our comfort zone.

Many of us have had the opportunity to practice in an unfamiliar setting at some time. Maybe it was as a new OD, working in an office when you first entered practice, or perhaps it when you filled in for an ill colleague only to find that the positions of even the simplest things in the examination room were unfamiliar. It took you out of your comfort zone.

Considering new concepts and ideas takes everyone way out of our comfort zone. Inaction is always easier, at least for the moment. It keeps us in our comfort zone.

Over the past two years and especially over the past six months, the entire profession of optometry has been asked to step out of our comfort zone and face reality in an imperfect and volatile health care landscape. It is not an environment of our choosing. We can affect it to certain extent, but we do not have the opportunity to control it.

Ayn Rand, noted novelist, said: "You can avoid reality, but you cannot avoid the consequences of avoiding reality."

The choice we made Friday was to face that reality. By voting to participate in the formation and governance of the American Board of Optometry, you, the members of this 112<sup>th</sup> AOA House of Delegates, made a bold statement to advance the profession of optometry, a statement that will resonate for decades to come.

Considering new concepts and embracing change is never easy. Our members need us now more than ever to lead us through the changing landscape of health care and map out a course for optometry. While we don't have a crystal ball, we still need to do the best job we can to look into the future.

While protecting our patients' sight and lives is a charge that we take seriously, we need to protect optometry's future in order to do that.

Access is a critical issue to us as practitioners and as a profession. If our patients don't have that access, in a non-discriminatory manner, nothing else matters. Scope of practice wins in our state legislatures have little meaning if our patients are denied equal access to our care either through medical panel exclusion or reimbursement inequities.

As we consider our future, now is the time for the profession of optometry to be inclusive, not divisive. Now is the time for those of divergent opinion to seek common ground. Now is the time not for "I was right" or "you were wrong," but rather, it is the time to develop together to evolve as a stronger profession.

We have learned much about ourselves and about our profession as a whole over the debate that our emergence into board certification has brought forth.

We have learned that we can disagree with one another without being disagreeable.

We have learned that unintended consequences of our actions are consequences none the less, and our failure to anticipate them is a lesson in leadership for us all.

And mostly, we have learned that making tough and unpopular decisions that move our profession forward needs to be done regardless of the fact that dealing with those issues has taken us totally out of our comfort zone.

How can a newly founded organization seek to develop new ways to demonstrate optometric competence without our input? It cannot. How can a new organization develop protocols and procedures without our opinions and ideas? It cannot. How can a newly formed organization hope to serve the profession and the public without our advice and counsel? It cannot.

I call upon all of you to move out of your comfort zones to spend the next year engaging in a level of communications and educational activity that is unprecedented in the history of organized optometry. No matter what side of the board certification/maintenance of certification debate you have argued, the profession has spoken. Now is the time to come out of your comfort zone. It is time to pull together, and it is time to see the other side of this monumental issue. I call on all in the optometric community to attend national, regional, state and local meetings to convey concerns, ask questions and become informed. We are a small profession, and we must all come out of our comfort zone and understand the all views in order to move forward.

Two-way dialogue at regional and state meetings is not only desirable, it is vital. I am asking every single affiliate to pledge to give your AOA visiting trustee not 20 minutes for an AOA report, but several hours to hold a town hall meeting to understand the concerns of members and what to expect from the new program. Your liaison trustee is there for you all year long, not just your annual meeting.

We have learned over the past year increased communications efforts need to take multiple formats. We have learned that social media are changing the way we communicate not by evolution but by revolution.

Web 2.0 has taught us that organizations need to reach out to members in a variety of formats. Expect to see changes this year in electronic formats with audio and video messaging to keep our members informed.

And as AOA reaches out to communicate with our members, we also reach out to communicate with members of Congress as part of our ongoing efforts to advocate for every optometrist to be able to deliver care to patients in a patient-centered, non-discriminatory health care environment.

Optometry did not frame the vast and ongoing changes over health care reform that have taken place and continue to evolve. We represent a small percentage of the doctoral health care providers in the United States but our influence is felt strongly in Washington. We have shown the courage to take steps to ensure our inclusion in a fair manner. Our advocacy efforts in Washington earn us great respect from legislators on both sides of the aisle.

Rep. James E. Clyburn (D-S.C.), U.S. House Majority Whip, said, “The AOA has emerged as one of the most respected and most effective health care organizations in Washington, D.C. From working with their outstanding Capitol Hill team, I know that optometrists – doctors on the frontline of eye and vision care – are determined to help the new Congress and the new president seize this important opportunity to improve health care in America.”

As our health care system in this country changes, how can we as a profession seek to blend our talents, smooth out the differences and move forward together.

Many have incorrectly assumed that our efforts to consider board certification stem from a desire is to be **liked by** medicine, but rather it is to be **seen like** medicine by patients, health care entities, regulators and legislators.

In reimbursement and the demonstration of quality we need to look like medicine. It is critical that **we** define optometry as a profession and that we are not defined by the government, payers or by organized medicine.

Over the coming year you will continue to see changes in how we serve you, our members. It is our duty as your professional association to help every optometrist to be successful not just in the **clinical** aspects of their practices but also to be successful in the **business** of running our practices. Our new Clinical and Practice Advancement Group has a new charge and merges both the patient care and the business of optometry into one center.

With new staff and new direction this past year, the AOA’s new Third Party Center has become an advocate for true reform in vision benefits. As the AOA Board continues to provide strategic direction that began under Dr. Kehoe’s leadership, we have moved from simply trying to get optometrists on medical panels to asking a more basic question:

Why is the wellness eye exam not mainstreamed as part of every patient’s health plan?

Furthermore, why does a patient need a separate insurance for an eye examination? After all, do family physicians see their patients under one insurance if you are ill and another if you are having a physical exam? I dare say not. Do dentists see patients for an exam, x-rays and a cleaning under one plan, yet perform restorative work under yet another insurance? I dare say not.

Vision plans are fine for materials but the idea of a patient needing to consult a separate listing for a doctor of optometry while ophthalmology is listed with every other physician on the regular plan is illogical and not in the best interest of good patient care.

Comprehensive wellness should be included mainstream in every patient’s medical plan with reimbursement paid in a non-discriminatory manner. And every doctor of optometry needs to seriously

analyze each and every insurance plan and individually consider whether joining a panel makes business sense for the practice.

You can expect a major focus of the work of the Third Party Center to involve partnerships and alliances within the ophthalmic and payer community. Developing a mainstream eye health benefit also makes from an outcomes perspective. We are working with employers to develop the data that show the cost savings that result when comprehensive eye care is a mainstream covered benefit for all patients.

Expect to see AOA partnering with affiliates to grow membership and deliver value to members. As AOA affiliates, you are our direct connection to our mutual members.

Growing AOA membership and delivering value to members is our common goal. Without your efforts, membership will not grow. Cross pollination of best practices between the states to increase membership is an area that the AOA will facilitate over the coming year. My charge is to develop closer relationships with our affiliates in order to meet our membership needs and concerns in a comprehensive and collaborative manner.

And, as we listen to our members at state meetings, a recurring theme is unhappiness with lack of portability of licensure. Some speak about a national license, but what they are really looking for is a means for ODs to be able to move from one state to another and have a reasonable method to become licensed in that state. Over the coming year, the AOA will increase our efforts to remove obstacles so that optometrists can be licensed in the state of their choosing without artificial restrictions.

Membership **is** Job 1. Our members are the reason that the AOA exists. They are our purpose. And the resources – in the way of dues, time, energy and expertise – that you contribute as AOA volunteers and state affiliates are the fuel that runs our engine.

Every program we propose over the next year needs to answer the questions: “How does this program positively impact our members? Will it grow membership? Does it show the value that their AOA dues dollars bring to the table?”

The AOA’s legislative and regulatory efforts throughout 2009 will continue and ramp up as new health care legislation is developed.

Your efforts and those of our Washington staff help ensure that optometry’s voice is heard loud and clear on Capitol Hill.

And while we are talking about optometry’s voice, the Optometry Awareness and Public Affairs Campaign continues to increase public awareness and the image of optometry: In 2008 we had over a BILLION media impressions. That’s messaging.

As we enter a new program year at the AOA, I have messaged each and every committee at our Spring Planning Meeting in April:

Every program undertaken must be able to address the following three questions:

- Will it cause the public to seek out optometric care?
- Will it give members better tools to meet patient needs?
- Will it allow members open access to patients without discrimination?

Rather than being concerned about **output** that measures our level of activity, we will be more concerned about **outcomes** that measure what we have accomplished.

Yesterday, in the House of Delegates we have chosen to not avoid reality but face it head on. We empowered ourselves as the AOA to become a founder of a new organization for the betterment of our profession.

Keshavan Nair, PhD, author of “Beyond Winning” and “A Higher Standard of Leadership: Lessons from the Life of Gandhi,” said, “With courage you will dare to take risks, have the strength to be compassionate, and the wisdom to be humble.”

You all have the courage to dare to take the risk to move our profession forward. At this critical juncture, I implore you to have the strength to be compassionate. Make an effort to understand opinions contrary to your own. And we all should have the wisdom to be humble and recognize there are two sides to every issue.

I urge you as doctors of optometry to step out of your comfort zone, to embrace the change that will happen in our profession as well as in health care.

And I urge the new board certification organization to proceed thoughtfully and cautiously and act in the best interest of the optometric community as well as the public.

Rachel Naomi Remen, physician and professor of family and community medicine at UC-San Francisco said: “The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention.”

I promise to listen to our members over this next year as we break new ground in our chosen profession. You, the members, have my full attention and the full attention of the entire AOA Board and staff as we work together to advance our fine profession.

Thank you