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New APA President Alan Schatzberg, MD, shares his goals for the coming year

by Anne Lambert, MS

Everyone is talking about the relationship between individual physicians, continuing medical education in all therapeutic areas, and the pharmaceutical industry. The American Psychiatric Association (APA) has attracted some particular attention with its decision to phase out industry-supported symposia from the annual meeting. At this year's meeting, "Shaping Our Future: Science and Service," two international experts in ethics, Paul S. Appelbaum, MD, and Laura Roberts, MD, presented a symposium on "Psychiatrists' Relationships with Industry" to help explore this area of concern.

Incoming APA President Alan Schatzberg, MD, continued this theme in his address at the APA annual meeting. Dr. Schatzberg opened his remarks by noticing the erosion in self-image experienced by many psychiatrists, in part because of anti-psychiatry movements, but also in part due to some developments within the field. To help restore confidence and pride in his constituents and colleagues, Dr. Schatzberg has chosen to focus on four main priorities in the coming year.

Re-establishing pride in the profession of psychiatry

Psychiatrists have long served as patient advocates, especially in the days before parity. By embracing the social work/advocacy needs of patients and training other mental health professionals, psychiatrists may have let the importance of their own credentials and experience be pushed aside. This oversimplification can also be seen in the over-broadening of syndrome criteria; for example, reducing the diagnosis of major depression to meeting five of nine criteria for at least 2 weeks. Dr. Schatzberg reminded his audience how rewarding breakthroughs can be when caring for patients with complex comorbidities whose treatment requires tremendous skill in both psychosocial and somatic therapeutic areas.

Continuing to improve the annual meeting

Although industry-supported symposia will be gradually phased out of the APA annual meeting offerings, Dr. Schatzberg is committed to raising the quality of the entire scientific program to the highest possible level, and he encouraged all APA members to provide ideas and suggestions. Dr. Schatzberg invited his colleagues to join him at next year's annual meeting in New Orleans where the theme will be "Pride and Promise: Toward a New Psychiatry."

Establishing new ways to interact with industry

The pharmaceutical industry will continue to have much to share in the field of psychiatry. Currently, they do more research than the national institutes and philanthropic foundations. Excluding industry would deprive psychiatrists and patients of new knowledge that could lead to improved outcomes. As industry develops new therapies, they need to be affected and guided by the experienced voice and input of academia. If the field of psychiatry tries to ignore industry, their influence is also reduced. Dr. Schatzberg encouraged new thinking on opportunities to interact and collaborate with pharma in ways that will support and enhance current and future guidelines.

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Facing our economic realities

The current economy and general loss of funding led to a relative shortfall for the APA, including their monetary reserves. However, Dr. Schatzberg and selected colleagues are restructuring the APA to reduce the number of councils and non-award committees to create a more efficient and less costly organization.

CME Outfitters joins Dr. Schatzberg in his appreciation of the dedicated research efforts and patient care of all psychiatrists and in his commitment to supporting and enhancing current and future CME guidelines. CME Outfitters routinely uses best practices, quality-improvement measures, and national guidelines to ensure fair balance and up-to-date evidence-based education for all healthcare providers.

* American Psychiatric Association's 162nd Annual Meeting. San Francisco, CA: May 16-21, 2009.