Medical business meetings and other human behaviour

I did not always enjoy medical business meetings; I ranked them somewhere between watching paint dry and watching the parliamentary channel. I forget which meeting it was, but I remember the people. The insults hurled across the floor, the reputations besmirched and the colourful characters! It was a revelation. I remember thinking, these people are courageous. This is fun! This is too exciting to miss, and that was the risk, to miss what was going on, and to miss knowing who were the surgeons who made the decisions and how it all worked.

Another meeting was an imbroglio, a deadlock that seemed to call for a rancorous adjournment. The chairman recited precedent and the rules of order so rapidly that the deadlock was broken, the problem was solved and the meeting continued smoothly. If you ever have to run a meeting and you are wondering whether you can do it with reasonable order, juggling egos and making it all work, then here are a few suggestions.

- The meeting must be democratic and allow every member to participate. These factors are crucial so that members do not think that a cabal is running the society, and that members can influence the affairs of the organization. Balancing representation with leadership is the most difficult aspect of an organization. A leader must lead, but also be led by the majority. A meeting is not the place to micromanage.
- You are the chairperson, so plan ahead and decide what you want to accomplish at the meeting. Begin the meeting a few minutes late to allow for stragglers and verify the quorum or the meeting will be invalid. Have the bylaws and Roberts Rules in hand, but only for emergencies. If there is a parliamentarian, introduce him and ask him to adjudicate points of order. Then the minutes of the last meeting are presented. These minutes are best sent out a few months in advance to the members so that there are no surprises. Often, the writer of the minutes shows a slant, and sometimes crucial issues are omitted. To get a sense of how the meeting will go, you can telephone a few people before the meeting to get their views on sensitive issues so that you will know what the likely problems might be.

- The meeting should have an agenda sent out well in advance of the meeting. This step allows members to see what the issues are and invites them to participate.
- All reports and motions need movers, seconders and a vote. The secretary must record all names and business conducted or the meeting could be subject to challenge. This detail is forgotten occasionally, and the entire meeting is invalid except for the general acceptance of the proceedings or inertia of the members. Reports are summaries of work over time. They occasion discussion and questions, and are permanent records. If the issues look rubber stamped, then members will stop attending the meetings.
- So far it's easy, even predictable. You relax, think you will be done in an hour and prevent the invariable drift to the door. You will actually lose your quorum, except that, in your organization, the quorum is set very low (the bylaw writers knowing few members attend the meetings) and you know a challenge will be unlikely.
- Here comes the excitement. An issue is raised – the new business part of the agenda. A member reads his motion, one that is reasonable but that you immediately know is trouble by the number of members talking with their neighbours. The motion brings up a new issue that has never before been discussed by the executive. Immediately, members are on their feet and moving toward the microphones to speak. The first few members state their disagreement with the motion. The third member to speak proposes an amendment to the motion, and the amendment is seconded and discussed. You think the amendment has to be passed before the motion. This rule is the risk of the original motion – that it can be passed, not as first moved, but in an amended form. You call for the vote and it passes. The members are sitting back relaxed, except for the member who proposed the motion. He stands at the microphone and says, "I want to withdraw my original motion." You think fast. Can he withdraw after the amended motion has been passed? You think not. Should you have asked him before

calling the vote if he accepted the motion as amended? Should he not have withdrawn his motion before the vote? You think he should have, but he should have known the rules, or maybe you should have reviewed the rules for everyone at the beginning of the meeting. Members around the doors are starting to drift back in, and a few are taking their seats. A loud guffaw erupts from the back row. You have an affinity for the back row because it is where you have always chosen to sit, being the only place you could make comments without being overheard. You keep a straight face and cannot smile because it would show that you agree with the member who laughed, and you must remain impartial. You wonder why the parliamentarian didn't intervene and look around for him but he seems to have left the room.

"Fellow members, the executive have to confer". You huddle with the executive, your hand over the microphone just as in the television drama *The West Wing*. You can't spend too long because it looks as though you don't know what you're doing. You don't, but you're looking for inspiration. In the middle of a pressured question by the secretary,

you hear a member say, "Mr President, I wish to propose a new motion." What now? It is the amender of the last motion. "Mr President, I wish to move that the last motion, duly amended and passed be declared invalid." You smile with relief. A way out. Now you have to look as if you had the whole thing figured out all along. There is no discussion. You see people looking at their watches but not making a move to leave. All in favour? Passed. The original mover doesn't raise his hand, shakes his head and looks disgusted. Could I have a motion for adjournment? All in favour? Passed.

As you tidy up your papers, emit a sigh of relief and look out over the members, some leaving, some having conversations in small groups, you have one of those moments.

That motion wasn't seconded. What to do? Call them back? Reopen the meeting?

You don't think so.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it's beer time".

Democracy in action, don't you love it?

But wait till I get that parliamentarian.

John Taylor