

Looking Back; Moving Forward

The Origins of Human/Medical Genetics Organizations

With so many new members in the American Society of Human Genetics, a quick review of the origins of and a current perspective on ASHG and the many related genetics societies may be helpful in understanding the importance and intertwined roles of each organization.

The American Society of Human Genetics (ASHG) was established in 1948 with the general goal of providing leadership in research, education, and service in human genetics. Its early major initiatives of sponsoring an annual research conference and publishing *The American Journal of Human Genetics* remain principal activities of the Society. ASHG has grown from a few hundred members to nearly 7,000, and it is the primary professional membership organization for researchers, academicians, clinicians, laboratory-practice professionals, genetic counselors, and others with interests in human genetics and genomics.

From within the ASHG, several specialty scientific and medical-practice organizations have been established, each with its own focus, goals, and roles in the scientific community. These groups are distinguished by their constituencies, their educational objectives, and their broader policy agendas.

National Society of Genetic Counselors

Through the 1960s and 70s, discoveries in human genetics changed the practice of medical genetics, and the field of genetic counseling emerged to serve patients and their families better in the clinical setting. In 1975, a committee of ASHG prepared a report on the definition and scope of the role of a genetic counselor, clearly stating the need for professionals trained in this discipline. In 1979, 8 years after the first master's degree graduation in the field, the **National Society of Genetic Counselors** (NSGC) was established as the advocacy group for genetic counseling and its practitioners. The NSGC continues to promote the profession as a recognized part of health care delivery, education, research, and public policy. Information about current activities may be found at the NSGC Web site (<http://www.nsgc.org/>).

American Board of Medical Genetics/American Board of Genetic Counseling

By 1981, the need for establishment of a certification board for medical genetics was recognized by the practicing members of ASHG, and the **American Board of Medical Genetics** (ABMG) was founded. The ABMG accredits training programs (clinical and laboratory) and certifies medical genetics practitioners and clinical laboratory geneticists throughout the United States. The first ABMG examinations were given in 1982, and the first 519 certificates were awarded to individuals referred to as "Diplomates." The ABMG sought recognition by the American

Board of Medical Specialties, the preeminent entity overseeing the certification of physician specialists, and became the 24th Board to be a part of the ABMS. Despite the unique and complex membership of the ABMG, consisting of both M.D.s and Ph.D.s with various areas of focus, the Board was approved to award primary medical certification status (as opposed to subspecialty board certification) to qualified Diplomates in the following areas: Clinical Genetics (M.D.s), Medical Genetics (Ph.D.s), Clinical Cytogenetics (M.D.s and Ph.D.s), Clinical Biochemical Genetics (M.D.s and Ph.D.s), and Clinical Molecular Genetics (M.D.s and Ph.D.s). More information about the Board may be found at the ABMG Web site (<http://www.abmg.org/>). Concurrently, genetic counselors formed an independent certification board, the **American Board of Genetic Counseling** (ABGC). See the ABGC Web site (<http://www.abgc.net/>) for more details.

American College of Medical Genetics

With the burgeoning development through the 1980s of new and complex clinical genetics services and genetic testing, the need for the establishment of an independent body to represent practitioners of medical and laboratory genetics became evident. **The American College of Medical Genetics** (ACMG) was incorporated in 1991. In 1993, the ACMG was accorded full membership in the Council of Medical Specialty Societies and is now the recognized body representing doctoral-level laboratory and clinical practitioners of medical genetics in the United States. The ACMG represents providers of genetic services and their patients, speaking for the specialty in organizations and agencies concerned with medical service, certification, and regulatory issues. The College is also represented in the larger voice of medicine through the American Medical Association. Whereas the ABMG accredits programs and certifies individuals, all learning and preparatory activities, educational programs, and professional practice guidelines development are the responsibility of the ACMG.

Association of Professors in Human/Medical Genetics

The introduction of human genetics into medical curricula was complicated by the fact that it is a mixture of a basic science and a medical specialty. Leaders recognized the need for a smaller forum in which to discuss institutional infrastructure and leadership issues, as well as how best to teach genetics to medical students. Therefore, in 1995, the **Association of Professors in Human/Medical Genetics** (APHMG) was formed.

For the past several years, the APHMG has been meeting independently of other meetings, and it retains its unique approach of having its membership composed of institutional representatives. The focus remains on enhancement of medical school curricula and training, but broader issues continue to be addressed and discussed by the group. More information about the mission

and activities of the organization may be found at the APHMG Web site (<http://genetics.faseb.org/aphmg/aphmg1.htm>).

Through knowledge of this history, our members may better appreciate the evolving nature of the “organization” of the genetics community. It is sincerely hoped that the membership will understand that ASHG will grow and develop, expand, and even

differentiate to meet the needs of an ever-more-diverse community in a rapidly advancing field of science. To provide input, please contact jboughman@ashg.org

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