

The Value of History

AAMR was founded in 1876, 128 years ago. A lot happened during those years, some good and some bad. The good things include a great deal of important research that was conducted by AAMR members and reported at AAMR Annual Meetings. Many researchers and other professionals in our field got their start by presenting their work at an AAMR meeting and then went on to long and distinguished careers. Another very good thing has been the continuing effort to define what mental retardation is and how it should be classified. AAMR's definition is generally recognized as authoritative for clinical, administrative, legal and policy purposes. And for most of those 128 years, AAMR has published scientific journals that maintain a very high standard of excellence. This list is not exhaustive and many other good things could be added.

But the purpose of this letter is to talk about the bad things that happened during our long history. The original AAMR Constitution adopted in 1876 stated, "The object of the association shall be the discussion of all questions relating to the causes, conditions, and statistics of idiocy, and to the management, training and education of idiots and feeble-minded persons; it will also lend its influence to the establishment and fostering of institutions for this purpose." Certainly during the first fifty years, the leaders of AAMR sought to promote the development of both educational and custodial institutions, even though Walter Fernald, Arthur Wyllie and others recognized that "many of them could live out in the world as respectably as the rest of us" (Wyllie, 1926). Eugenics was promoted extensively during those early years and many such studies were reported at AAMR meetings. AAMR leaders were concerned about the relationship between mental retardation and crime and wrote extensively about the problem of the "defective delinquent." For these reasons, AAMR actively promoted the practice of sterilization of individuals with mental retardation. This explicit support for sterilization continued until the early 1940s when the Nazi program became well known. What we would now consider more modern attitudes emerged in the 1950s, but AAMR's institutional focus persisted well beyond that time.

I want to stress that most past AAMR leaders were undoubtedly acting with the best intentions and believed they were doing the right thing. What they said and did was consistent with the way the world was during their time. I do not believe they were malicious or evil people. Their actions and policies were intended to benefit society as they saw it at the time, and we should not judge them by the standards of our modern era. Nonetheless, as recipients of the heritage they have passed on to us, we cannot ignore these aspects of our history.

Should AAMR be proud of its history? This question has been asked by a number of contemporary observers. The answer is complex and multifaceted. One could just as well ask whether the United States should be proud of its history. Should we be proud to be citizens of a country that once promoted slavery and supported racial discrimination for most of our history? What is our responsibility today for the bad things that were done by our American predecessors?

I believe it is possible to be proud of our American history if we recognize and acknowledge the bad along with the good and commit ourselves to protecting and defending the rights and welfare of all citizens. When we acknowledge the American history of slavery and racial discrimination, we can also regret the actions of our predecessors and apologize to the descendants of those who were harmed. The modern understanding of racism recognizes the responsibility of those who benefit from it, even if they do not actively support it. Thus it may well be appropriate for those of us who have benefited from the history of the United States to apologize to those who have been harmed by it.

The analogy with AAMR appears to be apt. The history of AAMR includes vigorous and extended support for institutionalization, eugenics, and sterilization of persons with intellectual disabilities. As a physician, I feel a certain responsibility for the fact that most of the early leaders of AAMR who promoted these policies were physicians who were also superintendents of institutions. All of us in the field benefit from the work that was done by our predecessors, even though the field has changed and we now support full community inclusion and participation. When we acknowledge our history and recognize that we have benefited from it, we may well have a responsibility to apologize to those who were harmed by the actions taken by past leaders of AAMR. For such an apology to be meaningful, it must be coupled with a commitment to change.

This is an historic moment for AAMR. This year we have embarked on a major reorganization of AAMR to make it more responsive and participatory. Indeed, you have already responded through the electronic conversations we have had during the past six months. We will soon join with our colleagues in related disability organizations in the first-ever Disability Summit to forge a common agenda, in which AAMR will have an important role as the provider of reliable and useful information to the field. As we prepare for the next 128 years of AAMR's history, it is time to look back and take responsibility for our past. Now is the time to close the door on the things we regret from our past and to open the door to the things we will support in the future. If we can be proud American citizens, then we can be proud members of AAMR once we have taken these actions.

I am proposing that AAMR conduct an event that will acknowledge our past, express regret for the bad things that were done in our name, apologize to those who were harmed by actions and policies supported by our predecessors, and commit ourselves to a new agenda that protects the rights and welfare of all persons with intellectual disabilities. As a physician and President of AAMR, I am willing to take the responsibility for doing this. I am writing this letter to all members of AAMR to solicit your opinions and comments on this proposal. You may feel this action is unnecessary or ill-advised, or you may feel it is long overdue. Whatever you think, I would like to hear from you. You can write to me at coulterdl@aol.com to share your thoughts.

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