

Hello Friends:

I've attached a letter regarding NCCAOM and the February exam cancellations, and some of the background events happening that not a lot of people in the community know about or are willing to look into. I'd like for you to review the letter and let me know if you have any questions or additional comments/discussion.

I'm afraid that the situation might be getting worse with the NCCAOM and the future of the organization. I'm concerned because NCCAOM has always represented the acupuncture profession, and has always served us well. Of course there have always been glitches along the way, but the administration of the board exams has never failed before – the one thing NCCAOM has to provide to keep the profession progressing.

In recent weeks, (since I wrote the initial letter) additional staff members have been fired, and I believe that more staff is planning to leave their positions at NCCAOM because of the fearful/hostile environment they are working in. This will not serve NCCAOM at a time when they are trying to undertake a huge project which is rewriting the exam from scratch, and implementing a computer-based test in less than 4 months.

I do hope that they are able to pull this off, but in the event they are not able, the profession needs to be able to act quickly from an informed standpoint. I do not believe that Kory Ward-Cook, the current Executive Director, has had enough practical experience to keep the commission on track. In the year that she has been Executive Director, they have had to recall an election ballot that was sent out incorrectly which cost thousands of dollars, a new certificate was designed even though a certificate had just been created, money was spent on a new logo even though one had just been designed recently, and finally, the failure to give the exam.

The cause for the exam cancellation is reportedly an anonymous letter with questions similar, but not the same as, the exam to be given in February, and NCCAOM claims the email was sent to NCCAOM, AAOM and AOMAlliance. Most organizations don't even acknowledge anonymous emails, let alone respond in such a way as to cancel the exam – the entire purpose of the organization. I believe it was an excuse (maybe even sent “anonymously” by someone in the administration of the NCCAOM) to cancel the exam because they weren't prepared to give the exam after firing AMP the day before the exam cancellation and firing many members of the NCCAOM administration who were familiar with the exam process.

It is time for the Board of the NCCAOM to take control of this organization. It is time to bring on a staff of people who believe in open policies and communication, rather than fear and control. We currently have a Board that is scared of its own shadow, and an Executive Director whom is capable of convincing the Board it's her agenda or the door. We need to be concerned for the future of our profession and to support an organization in the acupuncture profession that has lost its way.

With this in mind, below is the letter I'm trying to get published across the country. I'm also trying to encourage the Board of Commissioners to act. It is with this intent that I write this note, and the letter below. I am concerned, and I want to freely express this concern and alert the profession to take rise. Contact a Board member (contact info below) and express your concern for the organization and the direction it's heading. Encourage them to really consider how their actions will be shaping the future of the profession and that they have the backing of the community to stand up for what they know to be in the best interests of the profession.

Thank you,

Stuart Watts

April 2006

NCCAOM Letter of Concern

Fellow Acupuncturists and Oriental Medicine Community:

As one of the many people involved in the initial creation of NCCAOM in 1983, I watched a group of unique individuals pursue the dream of making acupuncture and Oriental medicine a recognized medical profession. At that time, there were only a few schools and less than 2,000 practitioners nationwide, but we all had a common vision. We believed that we could turn this "alternative medicine" into a mainstream healthcare option. We did this by forming groups such as the NCCAOM so that there would be a legitimate testing organization, and ACAOM to provide recognition for students in the profession. I am writing today to express a sincere concern regarding the direction NCCAOM is heading, and the repercussions it could have upon the Oriental medicine community.

I'm concerned about the ability of the organization to function effectively given recent developments such as:

- 1) Cancellation of the February board exams 10 days before they were to be given, and the justification for this decision;
- 2) The dismissal of AMP, Inc. two days before the exams were cancelled;
- 3) The move to a new exam management company that has no publicly-known history with NCCAOM;
- 4) Moving from paper-based to computer-based exams and writing an entirely new database of exam questions in less than 4 months without open dialogue from or to the students/community;
- 5) An unstable office environment demonstrated by recent layoffs, firings, and the voluntary departure of a significant number of staff members with no public announcement;

- 6) The “dismissal” of a publicly-elected Board Commissioner without any public notification; and
- 7) Questionable fiscal responsibility by the Board in regard to business expenses.

Cancellation of the February board exams

Upon reading the press release and explanation given by NCCAOM (<http://nccaom.org>) and the April 2006 article in AcupunctureToday.com regarding the board cancellation, I’m puzzled by the severity of actions taken, and the motivation of the decisions made. NCCAOM now claims there were “over 300” questions emailed by an undisclosed source that caused them to cancel the exams. This is a very vague claim without any hard proof offered. Is it reasonable to suppose that a student would be motivated to send an email to NCCAOM and AAOM weeks before the test with the hopes of getting exams cancelled, thereby postponing their own certification and ability to practice?

I question the severity of NCCAOM’s response in this most recent instance. Historically, exam questions have been compromised without causing the cancellation of an entire exam (i.e. the 2005 Decheng Chen case where those questions involved were retired). Why weren’t test questions retired after earlier security breaches? Why aren’t new test questions written and rotated on a regular basis to keep the database current? Shame on NCCAOM for not doing this. Is it not reasonable to think that a well-regarded national organization responsible for certifying an entire profession would have a contingency plan for a situation like this other than canceling the entire exam?

The core issue is that the management of the exam process is flawed. This entire situation would be irrelevant if test questions were rotated and created on a regular basis. Once test questions are used, they should be retired and used as study guides, as is done in many other professions. Instead of focusing on whom to blame, NCCAOM needs to change the management of the process and take responsibility. Furthermore, the loss of a few hundred questions should not justify a cancellation when there are thousands of questions in the test bank. That isn’t a problem that should fall on students’ shoulders – that is an organizational problem.

NCCAOM repeatedly states that moving to a computer-based exam and educating the community on the ethics of “cheating” will improve testing security and solve the problem at hand. The testing facility has never been a problem. The discussion of subject matter among students and teachers is part of the learning process. If test questions were rotated and re-written on a regular basis, NCCAOM’s justification for canceling the February boards would be a non-issue.

Dismissal of AMP, Inc.

AMP, Inc. has been the exam management company for NCCAOM for years with a successful history. On February 6, 2006, they were dismissed by NCCAOM. On February 8, 2006, the exam cancellation was announced. Were the exams cancelled because AMP was prematurely let go, and the new company (Pearson Vue) wasn’t prepared to administer the computer-based exam? Was Pearson Vue even in place before the AMP dismissal? Why, specifically, was AMP let go when they have the same testing capabilities as Pearson Vue? If it was due to a pattern of unacceptable performance, there

should have been a contingency plan in place before dismissing AMP, or the dismissal should have waited until **AFTER** the exam. Explain the timing of this, and how NCCAOM expected to administer a February exam without an exam management company in place.

Move to a new exam management company and computer-based exams

I question the timing of the move to the new exam management company, and the wisdom of the decision given the timeframe of the exam schedule. NCCAOM states that they were planning on implementing a computer-based exam in 2007. Now, the organization is moving to this new company, writing a brand-new question bank, and implementing a computer-based exam, all in less than 4 months. How is it possible to safely move to a computer-based exam so quickly when there is a history of working for 1 ½ years on this goal, only to have it fail after the exam was administered (lost data, inability to accommodate special needs or foreign languages, and eventual lawsuit)? How will this change be implemented differently than in past attempts that have failed? Why has there been no open discussion or feedback with the Oriental medicine community regarding this change, particularly with the students?

What direct experience does NCCAOM have with the new exam management company to feel confident that they can accomplish administering a fair and successful exam in four months? What other organizations have they worked with? Are there contingency plans in place if these goals are not met before the June exam so students will be protected and be able to take the exam and get on with their lives? When was NCCAOM going to announce the move to a computer-based exam considering the magnitude of this change and the impact on students? An explanation of how the computer-based process has gone through proper testing channels and background on the new company is needed. NCCAOM must make it a priority to let students know what dates comprise the two-week window to take the June exams as soon as possible. Their lives can't be on hold indefinitely.

Unstable office environment

Change in personnel is often good and brings new ideas, energy and experience to the table. However, I'm concerned about the number of experienced people leaving NCCAOM, and the circumstances under which they are leaving. Was there not enough staff to support writing an exam? What experience do the new staff members bring? Has there been any transfer of knowledge from old to new staff to aid in the stability of the organization? When can we expect a press release outlining these staff changes?

Dismissal of an elected Board Commissioner

There seems to be a general air of secrecy surrounding staff and Board changes that are not positive in nature. For example, the ABT community voted Pamela Ferguson onto the Board in the last election. Now she is no longer serving on the Board, and no public announcement has been made. Why hasn't the public been notified of this change, or if a new representative has been voted in by the ABT community? Certainly Pamela Ferguson was qualified to serve or she wouldn't have been pre-approved by the Board in the first place.

Additionally, there isn't a democratic process in place to elect Board members. Candidates are first pre-approved by the current Board, and then voted on by the community. This ensures that like-minded and non-controversial candidates will be nominated, eliminating much-needed diversity as well as checks and balances. There also seems to be a large disconnect between the current Board members and the profession. In the past, members have acted as practitioners for some time in the community before serving on the Board, and it has ensured a close tie to the profession. There is also a history of having open communication at national meetings between the Board and members of the community that is not as evident now. Not only is it important for the commissioners to interface with the community and promote open communication of current issues, but it is also important to have a CEO that has close ties to the Oriental medicine community and embraces open dialogue at all times, not just in times of crisis.

Questionable fiscal responsibility

Oriental medicine students pay a large sum of money to take the national exams in a field where making a viable living is often difficult. For the Board to use funds in an irresponsible way is a disgrace to the profession. While international travel is to be expected considering the nature of the field, holding Board meetings in expensive resorts around the world and booking spa retreats is not. Neither is office space commanding high rent in the waterfront district of Washington, D.C., or staff salaries that exceed \$150,000. What does this say to students who are now unable to establish their practices for months because of the exam cancellation? It appears that the current Board is less concerned with community outreach and advancing the profession, and more interested in taking advantage of a lucrative moneymaking certification process at the expense of those supporting it.

Conclusion

The implications of delaying certification are enormous to many candidates, so it only seems fair that NCCAOM address these concerns openly and honestly. I offer the following considerations and encourage an open response from NCCAOM or anyone else in the community:

1. Rotate and create new exam questions on a regular basis and retire old questions. Ensure the test bank is large enough so this problem doesn't recur.
2. Offer **free** board exams in June to those students affected by the February cancellation as compensation for losses incurred **in addition** to waiving their re-certification and exam results fee.
3. Establish open communication with the Oriental medicine community including publishing positive and negative news, inviting feedback for the exam process, and interfacing at community events.
4. Publish retired test questions and sell them as study materials. The income generated from the sale of these questions could be used to lower the high exam fees charged to students who are trying to make a living in a profession where it is difficult to do so. This would be similar to what is published by the National Alternative Medicine Association of America and Blue Poppy Press.

5. Instead of holding test-writing events around the nation, which is both time-intensive and costly, schools could pool questions and submit them to NCCAOM for validity on an ongoing basis.
6. Consider the income produced by the license/certification, and determine if it justifies the price of the exam, certification and state licensing fees.
7. Assure the community this situation won't happen again. The responsibility of preserving the exam questions is NCCAOM's – not the students.

Sincerely,

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