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Power imbalance between OMA board and sections is driving support to new Ontario Specialists Association

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A new group, called the [Ontario Specialists Association](#) (OSA) has recently been formed. The OSA is calling upon physician specialist groups (sections) from within the Ontario Medical Association (OMA) to hold referendums in order to decide if they will stay within the OMA or join the newly formed OSA. This is occurring as the OMA is locked in binding arbitration with the Ontario government. The question is, why is this happening, and why now?

The power imbalance between the OMA board of directors and the OMA sections is enormous. It clearly favours the board. The board controls a vast and largely unnecessary bureaucracy. It enjoys exclusive monopoly rights to negotiate for all physicians and collects forced and mandatory dues. It has a large reserve fund and a full-time economics and legal department. Board members sit on all key OMA committees. Their power within the OMA is almost absolute.

Recently, OMA presidents have announced that the OMA is changing. I was one of those OMA leaders who had faith in a newly elected board and executive, in part because I helped to bring about some of those changes. I have been a directly elected section on emergency medicine chair for 10 years, an elected Council delegate for over 10 years, and I was elected to the OMA Governance Committee in 2016. The Governance Committee's reform efforts led to OMA by-law changes that resulted in the first contested elections for president in the history of the OMA. The OMA president is now elected by the 240-member OMA Council, whereas before they were effectively appointed by the board after a pro forma rubber stamp vote in council. While this is a positive change, there is still no direct member election of the OMA president.

However, other more recent changes to the OMA by-laws have had the net effect of strengthening the position of the board at the expense of the OMA's much larger council and sections. For example, section chairs are now forbidden from sitting on the board of directors. Council resolutions are still merely advisory (non-binding) to the board, do not establish OMA policy, and are usually ignored. In 2016, the sections, at their own significant expense, were forced to form a broad coalition in order to oppose the board in court and at a general membership meeting in order to defeat a deeply flawed Physician Services Agreement. Sections still do not have the ability to change or amend their own bylaws without board approval. The board has vetoed duly approved section by-law changes in the past and still carries the power to do so. The board controls section election policies and the chair of the board presides over all section elections. This is a direct conflict of interest, as the board has a vested interest in whom the sections elect as their leaders, especially if those leaders hold views contrary to those of the board.

Even more problematic is the fact that the OMA controls section membership contact information and section communications. The OMA executive has repeatedly delayed, blocked, and censored section communications. During the 2016 Physician Service Agreement challenge, the OMA refused to post any section positions that opposed the agreement on the OMA web page. Only pro-agreement positions were posted. The OMA executive is now blocking a critical, time sensitive communication from the current section on emergency medicine chair on the issue of the OSA referendum. The public, OMA and section members should demand that the OMA president release all section approved communications immediately. In addition, section chairs do not and have not had full access to their members contact information. Can you imagine? The elected chair of a section, whose members join voluntarily (and whose dues are not forcibly collected), have no way of emailing their members directly. Section members also have no way to communicate with each other. Furthermore, on Oct. 30th, 2018 the current OMA president seemed to justify OMA obstruction and censorship by stating that: "Members have and continue to express frustration about sharing personal information (including emails) with groups outside the OMA, including sections." By stating that the sections are outside the OMA, she (perhaps unwittingly) showed how the board feels about sharing power within the OMA. She also failed to consider that perhaps section members may also be frustrated with an OMA executive that delays, blocks, and censors communications from section chairs to their members.

Another key issue is that sections receive no discretionary funding from the OMA. None. No funds to hire independent legal counsel, no funds for section specific economic research, no funds to hire consultants, no funds to hire staff that would answer directly to the section leaders. By starving the sections of resources, the board effectively prevents section leaders from advocating for their members. Negotiation and now arbitration decisions have been made largely without significant section input.

The OMA calls for unity of the profession. I believe in unity. However, I also strongly believe in freedom of association and freedom of expression. The OMA has for decades failed to provide sections the required freedom to associate and express themselves. It is only logical that many sections are seeking to form an alternative association to represent their best interests. Power and influence need to be shared fairly, not monopolized by those who call for unity, but offer only subservience and disenfranchisement.

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