



WORLD MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

**COUNCIL AND COMMITTEE CHAIR
ORIENTATION GUIDE**

April 2025

This booklet was developed to assist new Council and Committee Chairs to understand their roles as leaders and provide important information regarding procedures, process and products of the WMA.

General responsibilities

Within the Organization

The Chair and Vice-Chair of Council, the Treasurer and the President, together with the three Committee Chairs, constitute the elected leadership of the WMA. They work all year with the Secretary General to develop WMA's agenda and make decisions when the Council is not in session. Throughout the year, Chairs may be asked to:

- Cooperate with the Secretary General in developing meeting agendas
- Consult with the Secretary General regarding emerging issues on which the WMA should consider taking a position or otherwise addressing publicly (through a press release, participating in or speaking at an international meeting, etc.).
- Make a public statement about a particular issue, based on established WMA policy
- Assess new policy proposals to determine the best initial course of action
- Provide input on financial or administrative matters
- Collaborate with other WMA officers or Constituent Members (Medical Associations) on special projects

In addition to the specific tasks above, Council members – and Chairs in particular – should take advantage of opportunities to promote the work of the WMA within their own organisations and beyond. The WMA does not have a large communications and public relations budget or many staff and it depends heavily on its members, and especially its leaders, to raise the public profile of the association. Currently, despite its almost 80 years of work, the WMA is sometimes overlooked by the mainstream international health community and is often confused with the World Health Organization – even among physicians. Nonetheless, the WMA represents the global medical profession, and the potential power of the unified voice of millions of physicians should not be underestimated. Serving as an ambassador for WMA and working to amplify WMA's voice globally should be among the top priorities for WMA Council members and officers. To that end, these individuals can:

- Actively support and promote WMA positions and policies within their membership
- Increase the visibility of WMA through
 - finding opportunities to discuss the work and role of the WMA when speaking publicly, especially to the media
 - writing articles for medical journals
 - encouraging colleagues to view WMA as a resource
- Bring to WMA's attention relevant national or international issues or events so that WMA can respond either by publicising its existing positions or developing a new policy.

Within the Council

The WMA Council is the governing body of the association, responsible for developing policy, setting organisational priorities and goals and overseeing financial and administrative functions. During meetings, the key official functions of the Chairs are to:

- Conduct the business of their respective meetings
- Guide the pace and flow of meetings to ensure that agendas are completed within the allotted time
- Propose workgroups and/or rapporteurs to tackle specific issues or develop revisions of documents
- Cooperate with the Secretary General to prepare meeting reports
- Deliver the reports of their Committees to the Council (Committee Chairs only)

Workgroups

Workgroups can be used for many reasons. For instance, one might be formed to revise a policy document (this is the most common purpose) or perhaps to analyse a financial issue and develop recommendations. When the Council or a Committee decides to refer a matter to a workgroup, it is the Chair of Council's responsibility to appoint the members and designate a leader who will coordinate the group's work. Participating in a workgroup is voluntary. Normally, the Chair of Council simply asks who would like to be part of the workgroup and those interested raise their hands or respond verbally. In some cases, the Chair may request the participation of certain individuals whose special skills or expertise are needed or to ensure specific geographic representation. Workgroups membership is not necessarily restricted to Council Members. Advisors and others often participate in workgroups. Sometimes, it is a little more difficult to find somebody willing to serve as coordinator, especially for workgroups with a task that will take a long time or require a lot of coordination. It is very important to ensure that a workgroup has a designated leader and members know exactly what it is being asked to do¹. The Chair may ask the Secretary General for a written Terms of Reference.

Developing and delivering Committee Reports

The Secretariat drafts the Committee reports. The Secretary General will confer with the Committee Chair during the drafting process if there are questions about actions taken by the Committee. When the report has been drafted, the Chair will have the opportunity to review it and make any changes necessary to reflect the Committee's actions. Once the Chair has approved the report, it will be translated and distributed to participants via the WMA meeting document depository (SharePoint), in the three official WMA languages.

¹ POP 3.7.1: "Each workgroup will have a clearly formulated mandate and shall cease to exist when the purpose for which it was established has been accomplished or when Council so determines." POP 3.7.2a) "The Chair of Council will appoint a maximum of six individuals or constituent members to serve on a workgroup, including a workgroup Chair."

The Committee Chair delivers the report to the Council at its reconvened main session. WMA Council generally uses a “consent calendar” to accept the reports of the Standing Committees to the Council. A consent calendar is a mechanism designed to eliminate time-consuming procedural steps for approving recommendations on items in the report. Instead of addressing these items one by one - which requires introducing the item, stating the recommendation, inviting discussion and taking a vote, the Chair asks the Council members if they would like to discuss or disagree with any recommendation(s) listed in the report. Items identified for discussion or disagreement are “extracted” from the report. All requests for extractions will be honoured. Such requests do not require a vote. Items do not need to be identified in any order.

The Chair then asks for approval of all remaining recommendations in the report (the ones that have not been extracted). The Council votes once to approve all these items without discussion.

The Chair then addresses the items that have been extracted. These subjects are dealt with individually, in the traditional manner.

The following example illustrates the operation of a consent calendar:

A report lists 10 items with recommendations. One Council member asks that items numbered 3 and 7 be extracted. Another Council member asks that items numbered 2 and 9 be extracted. Following these extractions, the Council votes on accepting the remaining recommendations (on items 1, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 10) as a whole. Following that vote, the Chair then allows discussion and vote on item 2, then item 3, then item 7 and then item 9. When item 9 has been decided, it concludes the discussion on this report i.e. no further voting is needed.

Miscellaneous

Chairs may also be called upon to assist with other matters, such as to help resolve conflicts, work with the Communications and Media Manager, advise or cooperate with the Secretary General on a variety of subjects, meet or dine with special guests from the host country, etc.

Specific responsibilities of each Chair

Chair of Council

Between Council Sessions

The Chair of Council is the most active WMA officer between Council Sessions. The Secretary General will maintain regular contact with the Chair in order to:

- Report progress on financial, administrative and policy matters
- Seek advice and/or approval to take action on specific issues
- Request cooperation to develop agendas and work plans

The Council Chair also serves on the following special committees:

- Executive Committee: This committee serves as an advisory group to the Council, the Chair of Council and the Secretary General on various matters, usually that arise in between meetings. The other members of this committee are the Vice-Chair of Council, the Treasurer, and the Chairs of the three Standing Committees. The President-elect, President, Immediate Past President, Legal Advisor and the Secretary General are non-voting members of this committee. The Committee shall also engage in such other activities as the Council or the Chair of Council may designate.
- Finance Group: The Chair of Council with the Vice-Chair, the Treasurer, the Chair of FPL and the Financial Advisor, advise the Secretary General in the preparation of the Budget, the Financial Reporting, investment strategy and any other matter of serious financial concern. The group advises the Council on whether to accept waivers for subscription payments by constituent members.
- Sponsorship Advisory Committee: This committee was formed² to assist the Secretary General to apply guidelines for corporate relationships (grants and sponsorships). This committee must approve all grants. It is originally a subset of the Executive Committee consisting of the Chair of Council, the Treasurer, the Chair of FPL, and the Chair of Medical Ethics. In reality, all sponsorship questions have been dealt with by the ExCo as a whole.
- The Executive Committee also serves as the CEO Review and Reimbursement Committee: This committee was formed to review the Secretary General's performance and recommend compensation actions. The other members of this committee are the Vice-Chair of Council, the Treasurer, and the Chairs of the three Standing Committees.

² Summary Minutes of the 154th Council Session, Doc. 4.2/99
(Proceedings of the pre-Assembly Council Session held in Tel Aviv, Israel, 13 and 15 October 1999)

During Council Sessions

The Council Chair is the presiding officer of the WMA Council. He or she is responsible to:

- Conduct the business of the meeting
- Respond to requests, concerns and suggestions of Council members (both during and between daily sessions)
- Cooperate with the Secretary General in developing Council minutes
- Receive reports from the Secretary General, Treasurer and Committee Chairs
- Advise the Secretary General on meeting-related matters
- Appoint workgroups for Council and its committees
- Chair the Finance Group and report to the Finance and Planning Committee

At his or her discretion, the Chair may delegate any of these responsibilities to the Vice-Chair.

The Chair and Vice-Chair are elected from the Council membership. They retain their full voting rights in the Council. They are also ex-officio members of all three Standing Committees with full voting rights.

During Sessions of the Standing Committees, the Chair of Council

- Opens of the first session of each of the three Standing Committees and presides over the election of their chairpersons
- Substitutes for the chairperson of a Standing Committee in the event of absence

During General Assembly Sessions

The Council Chair presides at all plenary sessions during the WMA General Assembly. (The WMA President is responsible for all ceremonial and social sessions and the Scientific Session.) The Chair's responsibilities include:

- Conduct the business of the General Assembly
- Present the report of the Council to the General Assembly
- Conduct the election for WMA President
- Respond to requests, concerns and suggestions of delegates (both during and between daily sessions)

Finance and Planning Committee Chair

Between Council Sessions

The Secretary General, Treasurer and Finance and Planning Committee (FPL) Chair work together throughout the year to manage financial matters. In general, day-to-day financial issues are handled by the Secretary General, and the development of the annual WMA Financial Statement is the responsibility of the Treasurer and the Secretary General. The main responsibility of the Finance and Planning Committee Chair, when the Council is not in session, is to advise and cooperate with the Secretary General and Treasurer as needed. For instance, the Chair will cooperate on issues such as budgeting, financial policies and potential conflicts of interest. The FPL Chair usually meets with the Chair of Council, the Secretary General and the Treasurer before each Council Session, the so-called “Finance Group”, to review the financial documents and to ensure that they are familiar with the contents and any other pertinent issues related to the WMA finances.

Like the Chair of Council, the Finance and Planning Committee Chair also serves on the following special committees: the Executive Committee, the Finance Group, the Sponsorship Advisory Committee and the CEO Review and Reimbursement Committee.

From time to time, the WMA will undertake a strategic planning process. This may be done during a regular Council session or a special ad-hoc Council meeting might be convened. Alternatively, the process may take place between Council sessions and involve only a few selected officers or advisors who are instructed to develop recommendations for the Council to consider. Each process is different, however the Finance and Planning Committee Chair always plays a key role in these planning events.

During Council Sessions

The Finance and Planning Committee Chair presides over all meetings of the Finance and Planning Committee and is responsible to:

- Conduct the business of the meeting according to the agenda
- Respond to requests, concerns and suggestions of Committee members (both during and between daily sessions)
- Cooperate with the Secretary General to develop Committee reports
- Deliver the Committee report to the Council

Socio-Medical Affairs Committee Chair

Between Council Sessions

The Socio-Medical Affairs Committee (SMAC) Chair works throughout the year with the Secretary General to develop meeting agendas, evaluate new policy proposals as they are submitted and respond to important issues as they arise. The SMAC Chair should make an effort to stay abreast of international events and emerging issues related to public health, medical economics and other subjects captured under the umbrella of “Socio- Medical Affairs”.

The Chair of Council, in consultation with the Secretary General, or vice-versa, may request the Socio-Medical Affairs Committee Chair to represent or speak for the WMA on specific occasions. All public statements and communications made on behalf of WMA must reflect current WMA policy and must be approved before they are delivered. Please see the WMA Media Relations Protocol for further information on this subject.

The Socio-Medical Affairs Committee Chair also serves on the Executive Committee and the CEO Review and Reimbursement Committee.

During Council Sessions

The Socio-Medical Affairs Committee Chair presides at all meetings of the Socio-Medical Affairs Committee and is responsible to:

- Conduct the business of the meeting according to the agenda
- Respond to requests, concerns and suggestions of Committee members (both during and between daily sessions)
- Cooperate with the Secretary General in developing Committee reports
- Deliver the Committee report to the Council

Medical Ethics Committee Chair

Between Council Sessions

The Medical Ethics Committee (MEC) Chair works throughout the year with the Secretary General to develop meeting agendas, evaluate new policy proposals as they are submitted and respond to important issues as they arise. The MEC Chair should make an effort to stay abreast of international events and emerging issues related to medical ethics and human rights.

The Chair of Council, in consultation with the Secretary General, or vice-versa, may request the Medical Ethics Committee Chair to represent or speak for the WMA on specific occasions. All public statements and communications made on behalf of WMA must reflect current WMA policy and must be approved before they are delivered. Please see the WMA Media Relations Protocol for further information on this subject.

The Medical Ethics Committee Chair also serves on the Executive Committee, the Sponsorship Advisory Committee and the CEO Review and Reimbursement Committee.

The Medical Ethics Committee Chair presides over all meetings of the Medical Ethics Committee. He or she is responsible to:

- Conduct the business of the meeting according to the agenda
 - Respond to requests, concerns and suggestions of Committee members (both during and between daily sessions)
 - Cooperate with the Secretary General in developing Committee reports
 - Deliver the Committee report to the Council
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General instructions and information about chairing WMA Meetings

Process for moving through the Agenda

1. **Agenda item is introduced by the Chair.**

When appropriate, the Chair should give a brief history and overview of the agenda item. The Chair may decide to have the introduction given by the initiator, a proponent or a rapporteur of the specific item.

2. **Chair opens the item for discussion.**

It is often helpful at this point for the Chair to ask for specific proposals regarding how to proceed. The Chair can list the options for the Committee. The Committee may recommend to the Council to

- send new items of business to the members for comments
- approve/defeat immediately the proposal, or
- have an open discussion, including evaluation of written comments submitted by the members
- refer the document to a workgroup or rapporteur to revise and submit before the end of the current Council Session
- refer the document to a workgroup or rapporteur to revise and submit for consideration during the next Council session

3. **Committee takes action on the item.**

The Chair should always repeat the specific motion to take action before proceeding to a vote and explain the implications or possible results of the action.

4. **Chair summarises action taken and moves to the next agenda item.**

Once all official agenda items have been addressed, the Chair will call for “any other business” and take action on any new items that are introduced.

5. **Chair adjourns meeting.**

Parliamentary procedure

Chairpersons should be familiar with the basic parliamentary procedure used by the WMA. This may be identical to or vary slightly from procedures used in other organisations. Basic rules include:

- Participants must be recognised by the Chair in order to speak (“take the floor”).
- All decisions must be preceded by a **motion** that states specifically what is being proposed.
- Motions on the agenda, including proposals for new policy, proposed actions on existing policy, committee or commissioned reports, are considered to be **main substantive motions** and don’t need to be seconded

- Any Council/Committee member can make a **subsidiary motion** on the substantive motion. That motion must be **seconded** by another Council/Committee member. Once a motion has been seconded, the Chair will invite **discussion**. After the discussion is finished, or if there is no discussion, the Chair will ask for a decision. (There are special rules for some incidental or “motions to the order”.)

Example:

- After a substantive motion has been presented, the Chair must invite **discussion** before proceeding to the vote.
- During discussion, a motion can be made to **amend** the original motion. The motion to amend must be seconded. Discussion then proceeds on the amendment. Normally, a vote is taken on the amendment before going back to the original motion, unless the amended motion effectively decides the entire original motion. This can all become very confusing for the Chair as well as the Committee. The WMA Legal Advisor and the Secretary General are knowledgeable about parliamentary procedure and will assist and advise you whenever you are unsure about what to do next. While the Chair should make every effort to follow established parliamentary procedure, the most important thing the Chair can do is to make certain that everyone knows exactly what has been proposed and clearly understands the language and intent of any motion that is put to a vote.
- The Chair should generally allow everyone to speak once before giving the floor to somebody for a second time. (At WMA, Committee or Council members are given precedence over advisors or other participants.) The Chair should encourage participants to limit their interventions to one per motion.
- If the Chair notices that all the comments seem to agree with one another, he or she should invite any members with opposing or otherwise different views to speak. This means that the speakers queue (if there is one) will be interrupted.
- Once the discussion is finished, the Chair should repeat the motion and ask for a decision.
- If there seems to be unanimity about the substantive motion, the chair may ask for any opposition to the motion. If there is none and no member of the body asks for a formal vote, the motion is accepted by consensus.
- In case a formal vote is necessary or requested, members may vote **for** or **against** a motion, or they may **abstain** from voting. Since abstentions don't count, the Chair does not ask for abstentions. Abstentions will only be recorded when requested.
- The Chair counts the votes in each category and announces the **results** to the Committee/Council/General Assembly.
- If a **tie** vote occurs and the Chair has not cast a vote, he or she may cast the deciding vote. If a tie vote occurs and the Chair has cast a vote, the motion is defeated.

For detailed information on the parliamentary procedures of the WMA, please see the [Rules of Procedure for all Deliberative Bodies of the World Medical Association](#), which are available in the [Members's Area of WMA website](#) or can be obtained from the Secretariat. A short [Overview of WMA Parliamentary Procedures](#) is also available on the WMA website.

Special Considerations for Chairing an international meeting

- Speak clearly and slowly to allow those who aren't English first language to follow. When reading from a document, allow breaks every few words for interpretation. Provide manuscripts to the interpreters in advance.
- Avoid idiomatic language, word play, jokes and innuendo. There is always a risk that these may be confusing or, even worse, that the jokes offered with good intentions may actually be misunderstood in a way that offends or embarrasses somebody. It is also uncomfortable when some people are able to enjoy a joke while others do not understand it. Keep the meeting upbeat and friendly, but be careful with humour. Be ready to step in and re-direct the discussion if it seems like somebody is confused or offended by the comments of another participant.
- Be diplomatic and precise. In sensitive (especially political) discussions, speakers sometimes try to use images or metaphors to convey messages, expecting others to read "between the lines". Of course, it is important to be thoughtful and avoid making harsh statements. That is usually the reason people try to soften what they are saying. However, as the Chair, it is up to you to make sure that everyone is clear about what they mean.
- Avoid abbreviations and acronyms. We all use them constantly within our own organisations, but in an international meeting, they become cryptic and meaningless codes, even to colleagues who share the same language.
- Remain vigilant to ensure that participants do not speak too quickly or confuse the discussion with unclear language.
- Remember that many participants will be speaking in a language other than their natural language. Be prepared to help clarify comments and positions that may be unclear by summarising and/or repeating what you understand the speaker to be saying. It is essential that you repeat specific proposals and motions.
- Do your best to ensure that members make concrete suggestions and amendments. When proposing a wording change to a document, participants should express exactly how they want the new text to read. The Secretariat will project proposed amendments in English. Remind the group that, if possible, they should give their proposals to a WMA staff member before the meeting. This is especially important when proposing a large text change. In some cases, the Secretariat will even give the new text to the interpreters to assist them. This helps ensure that all languages have the advantage of a precise interpretation.
- Be sensitive to cultural differences. For many Council members, the WMA is the only forum in which they have the opportunity to interact with colleagues from so many other places. Remember that people have different styles of communicating their views and that some participants tend to be less formal and less rule-oriented, while others are accustomed to following a very specific process. Although you are expected to manage the meeting efficiently and complete your agenda, a little extra flexibility is often called for to ensure that certain members do not feel excluded or overpowered by a strict process.

- Remember that the interpreters' job is to *interpret* the spoken word. They are not called "translators" specifically because translation implies an exact representation of the original words. The WMA has made employing the best possible interpreters an administrative and financial priority to ensure that meetings run smoothly. In addition, the Secretariat will project specific language proposals on the overhead screen. Still, there is always the possibility for confusion, and this is another reason the Chair should always repeat proposals and make sure that participants speak slowly and clearly.
- Watch out for delays caused by interpretation and please take these into account. Remember especially that Japanese and Chinese often must be interpreted through English first. This is also (often) true of members who bring their own interpreters to sit beside them. Body language provides excellent clues of when the interpreters have finished. Participants will often nod their heads or look up from the table. Try to make sure that all languages have caught up before moving ahead. This is especially important during a vote.

The many leadership roles of the Chair

Listener

Being a good listener may be the most important quality of a good Chair. One of the most frustrating feelings for a group member is to feel as if they have not been heard or understood. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to express his or her opinion. At the same time, it is important to avoid lengthy debates in which different members reiterate points that have already been made or in which a minority viewpoint dominates the discussion. The Chair can prevent this problem by stepping in occasionally to summarise and repeat the key points that have been made, and then ask specifically if anyone has a new perspective to add to the discussion.

Consensus builder

Ultimately, the goal of WMA policy is to develop positions that unite physicians and are internationally relevant and applicable. A policy that gains acceptance by a narrow margin is not a victory for the WMA. The WMA has a history of exercising excellent judgment when it comes to extremely divisive issues. This is true of entire topics as well as particular points *within* a topic.

In addition to professional medical differences of opinion, there is no doubt that global and regional politics do enter into WMA policy debates (especially in relation to issues of human rights, economics and security). Sometimes, it is recognised that a subject should simply be avoided completely. In other cases, the relevant body (Committee or Council or General Assembly) will agree that the WMA should take action to recognise the importance of an issue, but that a definitive position is not desirable or possible. The group may decide, for example, that the WMA's stance should be to encourage further research or public debate, or to simply encourage those involved in the issue to use sound ethical judgement. There are many available options and it often falls to the Chair to lay out the choices and ease members away from non-negotiable positions.

The Chairs should make it a priority to promote the WMA's longstanding culture of consensus and exhibit leadership when guiding the group through complicated or divisive issues. The WMA's objective is never to avoid controversial subjects but to ensure that all ideas and perspectives are considered and to strive to find or create common ground. Still, despite your best efforts, sometimes a group will insist on putting two completely opposing views to a vote and determining which side wins and which side loses. Expect this.

Finally, the Chair is fully entitled to contribute his or her opinions to the discussion and to vote on matters. However, the Chair must not allow personal views to influence how he or she manages the debate process or otherwise supersede the duty to be independent.

Diplomat

WMA's purpose is to be a source of international support and assistance to individual Constituent Members as well as to its global constituency. Sometimes, a Constituent Member will have very strong feelings about a certain position due to a national situation it is addressing. At other times, groups of Constituent Members ally in an effort to promote a particular issue or position. The above situations are sometimes politically very complicated and managing them requires finding a balance between respecting and responding to the needs of particular constituent members, and serving the worldwide profession.

At times, the Chair may find it helpful to meet privately with individuals to fully understand the reasons behind their positions. There are often background issues that a Constituent Member might not want to discuss publicly but which provide critical insight into the reasons behind a particular argument. The more information the Chair has, the better they will be able to manage debates in a positive and constructive way. The Chair might also convene (formally or informally) members with opposing views to facilitate better understanding between them.

Leader

The Chair sets the tone for the meeting. If the Chair appears disorganised, unsure or consistently surprised with what is happening during the meeting, it will be very difficult to maintain order and lead constructive discussions. Therefore, he or she must come fully prepared familiar with the materials and the background of the items on the agenda. In addition, the Chair should have an idea of how they want to handle each agenda item and try to predict, as far as possible, any potential problems that might arise. The Chair should also be aware of any political or other tensions that might have an impact on the agenda or the meeting itself. The Secretary General or the staff member in charge of a committee will meet with the Chair before each meeting to brief him or her on the agenda and share any additional information that might be useful. Of course, one can never really know what is going to happen in a meeting, but the Chair's goal is to be the most well-prepared and knowledgeable person in the room regarding the work of their session.

Conclusion

Serving as a Chair within the WMA is a large responsibility, but it should be an enjoyable experience as well. The Secretary General and WMA staff are available to provide you with information and will do their best to assist you with any concerns or questions you might have regarding your responsibilities.

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