

The importance of consensus building

We are currently in a period of exciting advances for understanding of pathophysiology and treatment for conditions across the entire spectrum of rhinology ^(1,2). These discoveries have unlocked new ways of thinking and novel approaches to patients and the treatment of their conditions. During periods of rapidly evolving knowledge, when new interesting questions are inspired faster than answers can be determined by hard data, the application of newfound knowledge to change and/or develop new paradigms may be best implemented through collaboration, discussion and ultimately consensus building.

Consensus building is a powerful tool for shaping guidelines, policy and perspectives. Consensus building is a structured process in which key stakeholders—with a common goal and commitment to collaboration—work together to develop a mutually acceptable solution that everyone can live with. A rigorous consensus building process is implemented through scientific methodology and involves thoughtful discussion ⁽³⁾. Although consensus building benefits from leadership in facilitating discussion, domination of the discussion by a small number of participants is counterproductive and misses the point. To achieve a result that is acceptable to all, participants must make a genuine effort to listen and understand each other's perspectives and opinions from a position of mutual respect and equal footing. Out of necessity, consensus-building is a process that requires time and cannot be rushed. However, consensus does not mean unanimity or require complete agreement by every participant with every detail. Instead, consensus reflects assent—acceptance and supporting a group proposal as the best direction for moving forward. A consensus proposal is therefore not necessarily a static definitive decision, agreement or proposal but rather, a mechanism for moving forward.

The benefits of developing consensus around new ideas and paradigm shifts, especially in the absence of strong evidence,

is clear, having a physiological basis ⁽⁴⁾. Especially when strong, definitive scientific evidence is not available, the path forward must be determined more subjectively and based on opinion. Consensus building is an inclusive process that is designed to incorporate and consider diverse opinions, perspectives as well as concerns. This inclusivity also creates ownership of the consensus proposal. Although consensus may not ultimately incorporate every opinion or address every concern, meaningful consideration of all opinions and concerns improves support for the consensus product and ultimately, adoption of the consensus proposal, at least as the next step forward.

The rapid proliferation of novel knowledge in the field of rhinology has raised the possibility of exciting, new concepts and treatment paradigms ^(1,5). However, new concepts and paradigm shifts are only as helpful as the extent that they can be used to meaningfully advance science and improve patient care, which requires adoption, support and buy-in by the very stakeholders who would ideally be providing the richness of perspectives that should be reflected in true consensus. Consensus building has historically been an important tool at the cutting edge of medicine and remains as important as ever.



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