

**Orthotics &
Biomechanics**

What PFOLA Means for Podiatrists

*The Prescription Foot Orthotic Laboratory Association
performs a valuable function for you and your patients.*

by Kathy Ehrich

Imagine a day when all patients, regardless of income, can order prescription orthotics without worrying about reimbursement from managed care plans. Imagine a day when you sift through your mail from orthotics labs, and have a quick, simple method for determining which ones you can trust. Imagine a day when the insurance companies you deal with on a daily basis are consistently knowledgeable about the basic differences between custom and prefab devices. Right now those days may seem like part of a distant, hazy future; but that future may be closer than you think, thanks in large part to an organization commonly referred to as PFOLA.

The Prescription Foot Orthotic Laboratory Association brings together orthotics laboratories in the United States and Canada. Founded in 1990, PFOLA's goals include educating foot specialists about custom orthotics, creating a standardization in the industry to make sure all orthotics labs adhere to a set of guidelines, and increasing communication between the laboratories to help raise the caliber of custom orthotics.

As current PFOLA President Mark Fugit explains, PFOLA developed from a discussion among orthotics laboratories prompted by Ethel Ewing from Allied OSI in Indianapolis. This initial group envisioned an organization that would help orthotics labs communicate, and set common goals and standards.

Over time the idea evolved, leading to the gathering of about 30 people in Los Angeles the Summer of 1990. Sue Ann Croft, current PFOLA secretary, was at this first meeting. She decided to attend after her lab, Northwest Podiatric Laboratory in Blaine, Washington, received a letter from Ewing, inviting a representative to attend this first conference.

"We initially felt it was important to attend because the industry was so fragmented. There was nothing representing the entire industry," she said.

This exploratory meeting got PFOLA off the ground. At the meeting, PFOLA's founders realized that the industry desperately needed an organization like this, one which would unite orthotics labs. During subsequent meetings, the group created bylaws, elected officers (Croft served as PFOLA's first president), collected dues, and settled on a name. PFOLA now generally meets twice a year: once in the spring for a member meeting, and once in the fall during the annual biomechanics conference, held this November in Vancouver.

Approximately 40 orthotics laboratories across the United States and Canada are PFOLA members in good standing. The organization has an eight-member board consisting of individuals from orthotics laboratories scattered across the U.S. and Canada. Board members include President Mark Fugit, of Mark Fugit Orthotics Laboratory, in Glendale, Arizona; Vice President David McAninch of Piedmont Orthotic Laboratory; Secretary Sue Ann Croft; Treasurer Deborah Williams of Allied OSI; Eastern Representative Allan Fiber of Fiber Foot Appliances; Western Representative Crystal Meadows of FootStride Technologies; Midwestern Representative Howard Hillman of Rocky Mountain Orthotic Laboratory; and Canadian Representative Christopher MacLean of Paris Orthotic, Limited.

All board members work on a volunteer basis, in addition to their duties at their particular labs, and serve a two-year term on the PFOLA board. Fugit said elections occur at the Spring meeting. The next elections are slated for their Spring 2001 meeting, tentatively scheduled for Baltimore.

Although creating laws and collecting money are important for any organization, something even more important came out of those initial meetings. This was the decision to create a subsidiary organization that would oversee an accreditation process. This new organization would create a minimum set of standards for orthotics. It would also develop and oversee the testing of labs to make sure they meet these standards. After months of deliberation, PFOLA announced the birth of the Board for Accreditation of Prescription Foot Orthotic Laboratories.

Dr. Marvin Polonsky, current Chairman of the BAPFOL board and owner of Precision Orthotics Laboratories International in West Deptford, New Jersey, explains that it's important for BAPFOL to create an accreditation process in the industry, so doctors can be assured they are ordering a quality product.

This accrediting process is rigorous. But Polonsky said labs are willing to do it because clients and insurance companies look favorably on labs that have taken the extra step to ensure quality. There are currently 36 BAPFOL-accredited labs in the U.S. and Canada, and labs that are certified by BAPFOL are not required to be PFOLA members.

The accrediting process is split into two parts: testing and documentation. During the testing phase, the lab is given four molds and a prescription and asked to make orthotics that fill the prescription's requirements. The test has no bias toward a specific method for producing orthotics, and takes into account digital scanning systems including CAD/CAM. Polonsky hopes that labs treat this test prescription as any other they would receive from a foot specialist, although he admits there is no way to tell for sure what kind of special treatment the lab gives these orthotics because there is no on-site laboratory testing yet. Polonsky said they do not give the labs a deadline to return the orthotics, although they like to expedite the process as much as possible. Some speedy labs have returned the completed orthotics within a week.

The test orthotics and the molds are sent to RMS Management, a company in Helena, Montana who handles PFOLA's administrative duties. The executive director there checks the molds and testing documents to make sure they are blinded. This is especially important because the examiners are testing their colleagues. The management company then sends the documents off to examiners who inspect the product and write a detailed assessment of their quality. Each case usually has three examiners, and the examiners are usually owners or professionals from orthotics labs already certified by

BAPFOL (initially podiatrists served as examiners). Most examiners serve on BAPFOL's board as well.

The other, more detailed part of the test consists of the laboratory creating a technical standards document. Polonsky said this should outline all components of the lab, including checks and balances, quality control, and makeup of infrastructure. It should also include other relevant information, such as the lab's procedure for handling problems and calls from doctors.

The BAPFOL board reviews both the examiner's results and the technical standards document, and then decides whether the orthotics lab passes or fails the examination. Labs that pass are then BAPFOL-accredited. Labs that fail are sent their results along with suggestions on how they can improve their product and business strategy. Labs who fail are eligible to reapply for testing.

In the near future, Polonsky said there will be a third component to the accrediting process: on-site testing. Polonsky said they are still working on logistics such as who will conduct inspections and how they will get to labs that are so scattered across the U.S. and Canada. He hopes to begin these on-site inspections soon, and said that even labs that are already BAPFOL-certified were warned that their lab would be inspected within 5-7 years.

In addition to the above requirements, certified labs must fill a continuing education requirement. Labs must earn a set number of CME (continuing medical education) requirements at biomechanics conferences or other seminars addressing biomechanics. Labs must submit their certificate from the seminar to Dr. Polonsky, who will dole out credits as appropriate.

The BAPFOL board consists of seven members. It is customary for the retiring PFOLA president (who serves a two-year term) to then serve as BAPFOL president. However, previous PFOLA president Bill Meanwell was not a licensed podiatrist, and thought a podiatrist was necessary for the position. He joined the board, but asked longtime BAPFOL member Polonsky to serve as chairman.

At this writing, no orthotics labs are in the process of the accrediting process, but Precision Laboratory of Vancouver just received its accreditation this spring.

One reason for accreditation is insurance. Labs are hoping that insurance companies not currently covering orthotics will look favorably on labs that have subjected themselves to the testing procedures.

Insurance reimbursement for custom orthotics continues to be a hot topic in the industry. Most insurance companies, as DPM's know only too well, have a difficult time understanding the differences between custom prescription orthotics and the prefabricated ones sold over-the-counter in the pharmacy. To help educate these insurance companies, PFOLA plans to publish a grant in November that will offer funds to a research organization willing to test the differences between prefabricated orthotics vs. custom orthotics.

PFOLA plans to officially announce the grant at their upcoming conference. After that point, Fugit said there will be a two-to-three-month period where they will accept submissions from institutions interested in actually carrying out the research. Interested parties will most likely include podiatry schools, universities studying biomechanics, or even individual practitioners who have conducted studies in the past. Much of the funds for the grant will be generated at the conference—officially designated the International

Conference on Foot Biomechanics and Orthotic Therapy,—in Vancouver, Nov. 10 and 11.

Fugit said the organization is also compiling legislative data to stay on top of state activity that would affect the industry, and that could potentially be used to educate insurance companies down the road. RMS Management checks state websites and pulls appropriate information. They then forward this information to PFOLA's legislative subcommittee members. Many of these legislative updates are also available on their website.

Much of the money that helps fund these different programs is generated at the annual fall biomechanics conference. But the International Conference is much more than a PFOLA money-making scheme. It's the pinnacle of their year, bringing together foot specialists from all over the world.

Paul Scherer, scientific chairman for the conference and medical director for Pro Lab Orthotics in San Francisco, explains that the event gives podiatrists the opportunity to learn as much as possible about biomechanics and foot orthoses.

"We put this conference together as if a person only had two days to learn about biomechanics," he said. "I hope people recognize the opportunity to meet the best people, the ones who know the most."

This is the third such conference, and the first time it features a number of co-sponsors. The California College of Podiatric Medicine, from which Scherer recently stepped down as biomechanics chairperson, has sponsored the event all three years. The conference is also held in conjunction with the American Association of Podiatric Sports Medicine and the American College of Foot and Ankle Orthopedics and Medicine.

The topics at the conference are organized in three categories, according to Scherer. They include: what's new in biomechanics, clinical application and pathology-specific lectures.

Some of the specific lectures include: Subcalcaneal Pain—Who has the Best Treatment Outcomes?; Successful Management of Pediatric Flatfoot; Orthoses in Sports: Outcome of Soft and Rigid Devices; Principles of Treating Rearfoot Arthritis with Functional Orthotics; and many more.

The pace of the conference is intense, with 26 lectures and four workshops in two days. But Scherer says he wants to cram as much information into the 16 hours as possible. Lectures occur every half-hour and last for 29 minutes, followed by a one-minute break. Workshops last 90 minutes, are limited to 40 participants, and include many hands-on props. The conference also features an exhibit hall of podiatric products and services.

Scherer said that the attendance at the past two conferences exceeded his expectations both times, and he hopes the streak continues at this event. Their target is 400 participants. He also said that this is truly an international conference, with foot specialists flying in from all over the world. Last year's event brought in people from Israel, Australia, Hong Kong, Ireland and other distant locales.

To register for the International Conference on Foot Biomechanics and Orthotic Therapy, call the California College of Podiatric Medicine Continuing Education Department at 415-292-0470.

Like anything regarding PFOLA, the conference will not be limited to podiatrists, although Scherer says he expects mostly podiatrists to attend, and many podiatrists are

giving the lectures. Fugit says PFOLA does not specifically target podiatrists, but to any foot specialist who prescribes custom orthotics. Fugit added, however, that podiatrists continue to generate the bulk of business at orthotics labs.

“PFOLA is putting on an international conference, so we cannot discriminate on who can we allow to meetings as long as the individual is licensed and practicing within the scope of a given limit. It’s not for us to question who is in attendance,” said Fugit. “PFOLA is primarily catering to podiatrists only because podiatrists prescribe the bulk of custom orthotics.”

Looking ahead, PFOLA has both the biomechanics conference and the efficacy study on the horizon. PFOLA also has larger, less concrete goals they hope to see through fruition. These include a hope to accredit more orthotics labs, to continue to track various states’ legislation, and to make sure that all orthotics labs are making the best quality products.

Gone are the days when orthotics labs snubbed one another because they were concerned about sharing secrets and losing business. Enter the days of cooperation and the understanding that PFOLA unites laboratories and helps create unification in the custom orthotics industry.

For more information about PFOLA, check its website at www.pfola.org, or call at 800-347-6585.

The author is a freelance writer based in Boston.

Orthotics Laboratories Currently Members of PFOLA

United States Laboratories

Allied OSI Labs—Indianapolis, Indiana
Benefoot, Inc.—Edgewood, New York
Burns Podiatric Lab—McCook, Nebraska
California Orthopedic Lab, Inc.—Signal Hill,
California
Capital Orthotics Lab—Washington, D.C
Creative Orthotics, Inc.—Somerdale N.J.
Eastern Podiatry Lab—Trenton, N.J.
Ever-Flex, Inc.—Lincoln Park, Michigan
Fiber Foot Appliances, Inc.—Farmingdale, N.Y.
Foot Management, Inc.—Pittsville, Maryland
FootStride Technology—Snohomish, Washington
JSB Orthotics and Medical Supply, Inc.—Venice,
Florida
KLM Laboratories, Inc.—Valencia, California
Langer Biomechanics Group, Inc.—Deer Park, New York
Levy & Rappel Inc.—Saddlebrook, New Jersey
Mark Fugit Orthotic Lab, Inc.—Glendale, Arizona
Northwest Podiatric Lab, Inc.—Blaine, Washington

North Star Podiatric Lab, Inc.—St. Paul, Minnesota
Orcom Labs, Inc.—Indian Harbor Beach, Florida
Ortho-Rite, Inc.—New Rochelle, New York
PAL Health Technologies, Inc.—Pekin, Illinois
P & K Orthotic Lab, Inc.—Cedar Falls, Iowa
Piedmont Orthotic Lab, Inc.—Roebuck, South
Carolina
Plus Labs—Santa Fe, California
Precision Intricast, Inc.—Payson, Arizona
Precision Orthotic Lab International—West
Deptford, New Jersey
Pro Lab U.S.A.—San Francisco, California
Rx Orthotics, Inc.—Westchester, Ohio
Rocky Mountain Orthotics Lab, Inc.—Lakewood,
Colorado
STJ Orthotic Services—Hicksville, New York; Corona,
California

canadian Laboratories

Bi-Op, Inc.—Joliette, Quebec
Central Okanagan Laboratory—Vernon, British
Columbia
Paris Orthotics, Ltd.—Vancouver, British Columbia
SBI Orthotic Lab—Oakville, Ontario
Canadian Orthotics Laboratory—Concord, Ontario
Orthotics in Motion—Calgary, Alberta
Paragon Orthotic Lab—Victoria, British Columbia
Precision Orthotic Laboratory—Victoria, British
Columbia
Ultrax Podiatric Laboratories—Hobbema, Alberta