



THE PAIN PRACTITIONER

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President's Message

Thomas J. Romano, MD, PhD, FACP, FACR

Born and raised in New York City, I pursued internal medicine training at New York University Medical Center/Bellevue Hospital. My family and I later moved to another large city so I could do a rheumatology fellowship. Upon its completion, we were ready to move to a smaller, quieter, more peaceful environment so I could set up a private practice and live "happily ever after." Back in 1982 Wheeling, West Virginia seemed to be a good spot to settle. It had a sophisticated medical community, good schools, safe neighborhoods and there was a definite need for my services. I should have heeded the words of Frank Zappa, "Life is what happens when you're making plans." Little did I know that 20 years later my community would be featured in an article in the January 13th issue of *Time* Magazine defending the surgeons right to strike in protest of "the exorbitant cost of malpractice insurance." Numerous complicated problems affecting the medical community in West Virginia have resulted in doctors, including myself, leaving the state to practice in other locations, deciding to retire early, seeking employment as administrators, going into research or going to work in unrelated fields. This is happening in many states. Practitioners' dissatisfaction with health care delivery seems to be at an all time high despite progress in medical research that has

enhanced and continues to enhance our ability to deliver better and better care to our patients.

As President of the Board of Directors of the Academy, I have been bombarded with story after story of pain practitioners undergoing intense scrutiny and criticism for their prescribing of opioids for their patients who suffer chronic pain. Furthermore, reimbursement rates are declining while the malpractice rates are rising precipitously, adding fuel to an already raging fire. Some practitioners have been unable to obtain professional liability insurance at any price! These issues are not only important to the pain practitioners but ultimately to the patients themselves. What are patients going to do when certain types of health care are not available at any cost? This alarming trend must be reversed. It is time for all of us to become proactive. We must seek ways to impact policy, regulations, rules and perceptions at the Federal and State Government levels and within the insurance industry as well. We are stronger together than we are standing alone. We must speak out individually and collectively! Our voices must be heard and heeded.

We must learn about the responsible prescription of opioids and must use "pain/opioid agreements" with our patients to stay out of trouble with the DEA and State Boards. We must strive to keep the

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(President's message continued)

lines of communication open between practitioners of various disciplines in order to optimize patient care and minimize the need for opioids if possible. The Academy can help in this regard through its educational programs and through advocacy at the State, Federal and Payer levels. The Academy also provides tools such as the National Pain Data Bank and Pain Program Accreditation to enhance your pain practice.

I am saddened by the antipathy of children of pain practitioners and other medical professionals from pursuing careers in the healing arts. It is yet another sign that something is awry. This is truly tragic. The unhappiness of many of our colleagues regarding the conditions in which they practice must surely be sensed by the younger generation. If the best and brightest don't go into health care in the future what will be the future of health care? To reverse this trend practitioners need to find more satisfaction in their work. I don't mean monetary gain or even the joy in seeing patients improve. I am talking about having more control over our lives and our destinies. We chose health care to provide a vitally necessary service to patients in an environment of mutual trust and respect. Is that the present situation? I would argue that the situation is deteriorating to the point where professional satisfaction is the exception rather than the rule, with an increasing feeling of helplessness on the part of the practitioner. This trend can be reversed but only through knowledge, expertise and a will to change the situation for the better. I belong to many professional organizations. However, only this Academy has provided the necessary psychological support and camaraderie to enable me to carry on. The Academy is in a unique position to help practicing pain practitioners because its leadership is comprised mainly of clinicians. Our membership can rely on the advice and

counsel of other practitioners who are "in the trenches." The Academy's leadership can relate to your problems and concerns. Please do not hesitate to ask for help and advice. The Academy can definitely relate to what you are going through.

No one has all the answers. I certainly do not pretend to be able to solve all the problems presented in this message. I think we need to redouble our efforts to improve the skills of practicing pain practitioners, to provide clinicians with practical advice and to offer support while always keeping in mind our common goal -- the good of the patient. It is easy to lose site of this very basic concept because our professional lives have become far too complex. Private pain practitioners typically have to deal with OSHA, HIPAA, Medicare, Medicaid, third party payers, malpractice/liability issues and a host of other business and professional concerns on an ongoing basis. When do we have the time to keep up in our own specialty, to be current in the pain literature, to earn a decent living without suffering burnout, and to be able to spend time with family and friends? Again the answer to this question depends on each individual circumstance. However, I can tell you from personal experience that, had I not become associated with the Academy, I would have had a much harder time running my practice and supporting my family, much to the detriment of my quality of life. The Academy can instruct, nurture and provide support in a number of areas depending on the needs of its members. If you haven't taken advantage of what the Academy can offer please take this opportunity to do so. Don't forget, it's your Academy! Make it work for you!

Reference

Krauthammer, C. (January 13, 2003). Sick, tired and not taking it anymore. *Time*, 53.