

From Writer to President

The Road Less Traveled

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In my office, on the wall across from my desk, hangs a print drawing of a *New Yorker* cartoon depicting a small girl holding a piece of chalk, which reads, “I try to write a little bit every day.” So it has been for me ever since I was first invited to pen a column for the newly launched publication, *Neurology Today*®, 2 decades ago. At the time, I had no idea that the request would lead to a second career in journalism, multiple editorships, and hundreds of bylined stories about neurology, neurologists, and people with neurologic conditions for years to come.

Before I began to write, I had been working as a general neurologist in a full-time practice in Tarrytown, New York, resolutely determined to learn the business side of medicine from the ground up. A 2-year stint as a member of a New York–based independent practice association’s board of directors led me to recognize that a vast knowledge gap divided practicing physicians and payers and other members of corporate America. We lacked the language needed to communicate effectively and the business skills to help us negotiate for better reimbursement. After many disappointing meetings at which we were unable to fulfill requests from insurers for outcome measures or provide any type of quality data, I decided to go to business school. I chose the University of Connecticut’s executive MBA program, which met on weekends and allowed me to continue to run my practice. Graduating in 1999, I eschewed banking and other corporate opportunities because I still loved clinical neurology best. Instead, I approached a member of the American Academy of Neurology’s (AAN) Medical Economics Subcommittee and asked if there could be a place for me on it.

Meanwhile, in 2001, the editors of the new neurology tabloid, *Neurology Today*, began searching for a neurologist to write practice stories. Seeking a reprieve from the tedious task of analyzing RVU practice expenses to which I had been initially assigned, I welcomed the diversion. Although the trial story I was asked to write—“Do Neurologists Need MBAs to Conduct the Business of Medicine?”¹—took a painstaking 10 weeks to complete, I found that I was hooked. I loved everything about the process: doing research, conducting interviews, piecing ideas into sentences and sentences into paragraphs, and seeing the final product in print. Much like neurology, all the clues could be found by listening, and the stories composed by patching findings together.

For an introverted neurologist like me, isolated in solo practice, the allure was undeniable. Here was a forum to interact

with my colleagues throughout the country and hear their stories. The experience was cathartic. I converted every administrative aggravation I encountered in my practice into a quest for answers. Those answers ultimately found their way into stories for the *In Practice* column, which offered tips, solutions, and best practices. By the time each was completed, my frustration had lifted. During those early years, I wrote about the challenges of running an office and dealing with insurance hassles,² managed care contract negotiations,³ medicolegal issues,⁴ audits,⁵ the management of employees,⁶ regulatory changes,⁷ billing rules,⁸ practice strategies to reduce no-shows,⁹ and much more. As documentation transitioned from paper to digital, I wrote about apps and electronic tools that helped us to prescribe¹⁰ and make better clinical decisions,¹¹ and about how to select, adopt, and maintain electronic medical records¹²—chronicling the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Over time, I branched out, covering topics that I simply found intriguing and wanted to learn more about: stem cell research and federal policy,¹³ cultural myths that affect our patients,¹⁴ health care systems in other nations,¹⁵ and why neuroscientists were fascinated by zombies.¹⁶ I played the critic by rating how the media depicted neurology: in *Masterpiece Classic’s Downton Abbey*,¹⁷ in an ABC series called *Black Box*,¹⁸ an NBC series called *3 Pounds*,¹⁹ and a series of plays called *Neurofest*.²⁰ It granted me hours and hours of guiltless binge-watching and allowed me to interject fun and humor into my columns—a respite from my typically sobering pieces.

I was fascinated by trends that led me to imagine the future and gave readers a glimpse of things to come: emailing with patients²¹ in 2002; voice recognition²² software in 2003; neurohospitalists²³ (nearly unheard of) in 2005; subspecialty certification²⁴ and the use of telemedicine²⁵ in 2006; podcasts²⁶ in 2007; patient satisfaction²⁷ surveys in 2009; the demise of private practice²⁸ neurology in 2010, the first in a series of stories I dubbed death-by-a-thousand-cuts; accountable care²⁹ organizations in 2011; and open notes³⁰ in 2012 (a regulation mandated this year).

I was amazed and gratified when my stories led to real-life actions. In 2006, a story about on-call stipends³¹ helped colleagues advocate to administrators for their adoption. In the same year, a controversial column about a new nerve conduction device³² being administered by office staff at general

medicine practices caught the attention of a *New York Times*³³ reporter who took the story national, ultimately driving it off the market.

From an empathy borne of traumatic interactions I experienced in the third grade when I arrived in this country unable to speak English, the first foreigner and the first Jew to attend my elementary school, I grew up with a sense of “otherness.” This drove me to work harder to prove myself from a young age and to speak out for those who were mistreated when I became an adult. So when reports of inequities in neurology came out, I felt compelled to write about those. I submitted a series on gender issues, starting with salary disparities for women³⁴; the leaky pipeline³⁵ in neuroscience; women’s reluctance to negotiate³⁵; and ongoing sexual harassment.³⁶ I wrote about trailblazers in diversity and inclusion,³⁷ anti-racism³⁸ in our profession, and, with great delight, about how future neurologists were planning careers focusing on health care disparities.³⁹ I also wrote about the challenges to trainees, from medical students⁴⁰ to residents⁴¹ to international medical graduates⁴² seeking a career in neurology.

The stories that were most heartwarming to write over the years were the personal ones. Most memorable were neurologists who faced adversity, like the many displaced by Hurricane Katrina, including the last 3 neurology residents to leave Charity Hospital,⁴³ and others who confronted natural disasters, including earthquakes,⁴⁴ tornadoes,⁴⁵ floods, and fires.⁴⁶ Their ingenuity and perseverance inspired me, as has the humanity of countless neurologists who were unsung heroes,⁴⁷ quietly devoting their time off to helping others in their communities⁴⁸ and across the globe.⁴⁹

The anecdotes that captivated me the most—and made me deeply proud to be a member of our profession—were those I encountered during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. During the lockdown, writing provided solace. I channeled my angst about the future into stories about our how colleagues were faring during the pandemic. Those neurologists moved me with their bravery, dedication, and innovation, and helped to heal my own downtrodden spirit. In March 2020, I spoke to neurologists in France⁵⁰ and Spain,⁵¹ whose COVID-19 wards filled first, and in the upcoming months, with US neurologists on the frontlines and innovators who designed personal protective equipment.⁵² I interviewed women who were pregnant⁵³ when information was scarce; others who had to juggle child care⁵⁴ with work; and neurologists who were let go, furloughed, or issued pay cuts in private practice⁵⁵ and academia.⁵⁶ I had conversations with residents who grieved with families at deathbeds,⁵⁴ and spoke to members of the neurology workforce in all stages of their careers about the devastating emotional fallout⁵⁷ from the pandemic. Their stories remain with me, and their resilience still astonishes me. As always, I found that writing helped me move on, lifted my anxiety, seeming small and indulgent against those experiences shared with me.

As I grew more confident in my writing for *Neurology Today*—and thankfully, more efficient—I found myself ready to take on another challenge. In April 2005, the AAN launched the patient and caregiver magazine *Neurology Now*, and I took on the task of learning to write for the public. Lay publications require a different set of skills, and each story I tackled brought me closer to writing with ease. I enjoyed thinking about how to help nonphysician readers absorb medical concepts so they could make more informed decisions about their health and that of their families. Those stories needed not to be simply understandable, but to anticipate questions and provide answers to them. I particularly liked writing parallel stories: one patient-facing and one addressing neurologists.

The process challenged me to think about both sides of the physician–patient relationship in new ways and helped me focus on how health care issues affect our patients. In 2011, I wrote about how neurologists can prepare⁴⁵ for natural disasters, after advising patients with neurologic conditions on how to prepare⁵⁸ for emergencies. I addressed ways neurologists can avoid medication errors,⁵⁹ and measures patients could take to avoid being the victim of a prescribing error.⁶⁰ I advised patients and caregiver readers on steps they could take to avoid insurance denials⁶¹ and out-of-network medical bills⁶² and asked insurance company executives to provide tips to neurologists that would decrease rejections.⁶³ I informed neurologists about ways to advocate for our disabled patients,⁴⁸ and patients with disabilities about their workplace rights.⁶⁴

In 2014, I became editor-in-chief of *Neurology Now*, the magazine that changed its name to *Brain & Life* in 2018, and for which, by then, I had contributed myriad stories. I have treasured that role and am grateful to the neurologists who have comprised its editorial board of experts. At the onset of the pandemic, we met weekly to consider the best means by which to deliver accurate, unbiased information to the public, to patients, and to their caregivers. It was a team effort that resulted in more than doubling our online reach.

Five years earlier, 2 former patients had contacted me about an opening for a physician editorship at *Consumer Reports*. My portfolio by then was robust, given all the opportunities I had been given writing for the AAN, and I was offered the position in 2008, despite the fact that the publication was seeking a primary care physician. My 10-year experience there was among the most rewarding of my career and expanded my skills and experience. The *Consumer Reports* health team comprised health services researchers, health policy experts, physicians, data analysts, and experienced journalists backed by talented legal, art, television production, video communications, public relations, and social media staff. All were devoted to the mission of improving consumer health, and I learned a tremendous amount from each of them and from a formal training in journalism.

When my division was shut down in 2018, and I began to consider other prospects, I focused on the mission-driven nonprofit sector, and there was no organization better to serve than the AAN. By then, I had spent 20 years on various endeavors at the AAN and had developed a deep appreciation for the work done by our organization, its devoted staff, and dedicated volunteers.

Over the course of the past 2 decades, I have written hundreds of stories for those publications, as well as an occasional article for *Neurology*[®]. Between 2007 and 2012, I served as editor-in-chief of the AAN website and led a talented team of editors that included José Merino, now the editor-in-chief of this journal. From 2010 until I became president of the AAN, I was privileged to join the associate editor team for *Neurology Today*, the same publication that had given me my start.

Interviewing members of this organization in those various roles has given me a unique lens into the minds and hearts of neurologists. It has been a rare privilege and one I will always cherish. Each conversation has taught me something new, and over time, I have developed a profound admiration for the work neurologists do and for the sacrifices they make daily.

My path to become president has certainly been unique. It came through writing, a process that led me to learn about every aspect of the AAN. I now contribute monthly President's columns to *AANnews*[®], and the research and interviews I conduct for these, as well for my ongoing pieces in *Neurology Today*, continue to inform the decisions I make as the current physician leader of our organization.

For a relatively small medical society, the AAN has built a disproportionately large suite of publications with hundreds of members serving on their neurologist editorial boards. As I consider the 70th anniversary of this publication, and the 20th anniversary of *Neurology Today*, I will forever be indebted to the AAN for the doors it has opened to me. I am grateful to Bud Rowland and Steve Ringel, both former presidents and the first 2 editors-in-chief of *Neurology Today*. Their mentorship and encouragement were invaluable to me, along with Fay Ellis, who has patiently edited and improved my stories. I am also appreciative of the advice and dedication of editorial board members, who ensure that our stories are factual, timely, unbiased, and resonate with readers. Finally, I am thankful for the privilege of still being able to write a little every day.

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