Meetings, journals, and the internet: networks of communication

Editorial

Yesterday as I finished up operating on a spastic valgus foot deformity, I reflected on the many advancements in medicine we've made since I started practicing orthopaedics 25 years ago. These include the foot pump to decrease the swelling, the availability of biologically safe allograft, improved lightweight casting material, and gait laboratories to assess initial problems and reassess outcomes. None of these was widely available in the 70s. The medical progress that we enjoy is the product of good communication. This comes in many forms: among them, scientific meetings, the printed word and, more recently, the internet.

When the tragic events of September 11, 2001 caused cancellation of the American Academy for Cerebral Palsy and Developmental Medicine Annual Meeting, it left a sense of loss for the crisp, fresh results of current research. As we mourned for those lost that day, we worried that those improvements we might have brought home to our patients would have to wait. The inevitable sideline chats among colleagues that elevate our level of sophisticated health care were set back. As part of the meeting process, papers are often refined and reworked as the result of feedback from the audiences attending these meetings. Gurus of medicine get the opportunity to update attendees on their current practice technique. This was missing last September, but it will be back at full strength in New Orleans this year.

Like the Ten Commandments, the printed word often seems to be carved in stone. This is especially true in a journal such as DMCN where the half-life of citations is quite extended. The product of the authors is refined through the peer review process. Often it has already undergone the scrutiny of a meeting presentation. It can, however, have the disadvantage of seeming like old news. Once it hits that volume in the Index Medicus, it virtually impossible to retract. At least it also becomes retrievable. Fortunately, as citations age, they lose their importance especially if newer publications contradict the old. Five-year outcomes followed to ten and twenty-year outcomes can later be reversed.

At the Pediatric Orthopaedic Society of North America meeting in May 2002 in Salt Lake City, a seminar on cerebral palsy underlined the importance of the orthopedist to keep up with research findings in the multi-disciplines. The broad base of research findings presented in this journal allow us to do just that.

Even orthopedic surgeons understand that their contribution is only part of the whole menagerie of options of care. Prevention is key. This month's annotation on folic acid and birth defects[1] updates us about the broad understanding of the current status of this important nutrient. Development of evaluation tools to help in screening are important for individual educational recommendations and prospective and retrospective studies. Billard and colleagues validate and standardize the outcomes of a new evaluation tool in 500 normally developing children and with children with epilepsy.[2,3]

Although the internet can be a source of information, it lacks the discipline enforced by paper induced lost forests. It can also bring forth fresh misinformation. Papers and ideas usually improve with the peer review process. While this is generally lacking in many websites, before something can make it onto the AACPDM site, it undergoes member review and is consistent with recognized medical opinion on the subject. Currently on the AACPDM website you can get access to the works of the members and committees of the AACPDM. Of course, the AACPDM website cannot enforce these standards on other websites linked to their own. On less scrutinized websites are testimonials hawking alternative medical treatments for children with various developmental needs. With the push of a button, parents have all they need to chase after the next cure for their child. The speed of cyberspace can be accompanied by landmines for the unwary.

As I grow in medical knowledge, I recognize the importance and interdependence of professional meetings, medical journals, and cyberspace interactions. While each have their advantages and disadvantages, they all provide communication and thereby advance the practice and study of medicine.

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