



At 98, A Physician becomes his own Case Study

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ABSTRACT:

As a practicing neurologist for many decades, I closely observed each patient, searching for signs of improvement or recovery. Each step in the healing process required time and effort, which could become exhausting, and I have always balanced hope and anxiety anticipating recovery for my patients. But successful outcomes were deeply rewarding. Now that I am 98, the tables are turned, and my daily challenge is to diagnose and treat myself, closely monitoring my own state of mind and the condition of my aging body. As I advised so many patients to do over my career, I adjust my diet, exercise habits, and outlook to sustain my health and my mood.

Keywords: Neurologist, Daily challenge

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INTRODUCTION

In my more than half century as a neurologist and exercise specialist, the tools of medicine advanced considerably. Imaging technologies such as CT and MRI scans made it possible to visualize brain lesions that, when I started in neurology in the 1950s, had to be inferred from symptoms. Drugs such as levodopa for Parkinson's disease and tissue plasminogen activator for ischemic stroke can treat conditions that previously left physicians powerless. But during my years teaching neurology and medicine at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque I found myself recommending changes in lifestyles and attitude more often than I prescribed tests and drugs. A change in diet or exercise can make as big a difference as medications in conditions including headache and depression.

When prescribing treatments like these I closely observed each patient, searching for signs of improvement or recovery. Each step in the healing process requires time and effort which can become exhausting, and I have always balanced hope and anxiety anticipating recovery for my patients. But successful outcomes were deeply rewarding.

Now, at 98, the tables are turned, and my daily challenge is to diagnose and treat myself. I monitor my own state of mind and the condition of my aging body closely. And as I advised so many patients to do over my career, I adjust my diet, exercise habits, and outlook to sustain my health and my mood.

Challenges

As I have aged, I noticed changes in my state of mind. Some I try to resist; others I must live with. I have become suspicious of the motives of everybody and everything--even of my family. I attribute this to advancing age. Whenever I run into some problem I always think of the worse possible outcome. I suppose this is due to aging too. The only remedy for these habits of mind is to be aware of them, and to try to remind myself that my reactions sometimes have no rational basis.

I also face increasing physical limitations, and for these I can compensate, at least partially. Because I have lost all subcutaneous tissues, even the slightest touch of the kitchen counter or furniture is likely to cause damage. This results in constant bruising of my extremities, so I try to move carefully, slowly, and deliberately. And because I have lost flexibility (not surprising at my age), I can no longer bend down far enough to pull on my shoes. So I fashioned a device from an old wooden coat hanger by sawing off much of the wood, leaving a long handle attached to the hook (see figure). I use the hook to snag the loop at the back of each shoe and pull it on. But this has become a struggle too.



Caption: The tool I use to pull on my shoes.

My loss of flexibility extends to my daily routine. I must now do everything at the usual time. If I eat, sleep, exercise, or use the toilet at an unaccustomed time, my biological rhythms get out of their groove and I become very uncomfortable.

Exercise

To maintain my fitness and independence and avoid becoming a burden to family, I exercise regularly. Since walking unaided is no longer possible, I rely on a walker to get around the house and walk outdoors. I use a Concept 2 rowing machine for strength and endurance training, rowing 3,000 or 6000 meters daily except Saturdays, which I reserve for rest. Additionally, I use kettle bells (Russian method), performing 40 repetitions with both 20 and 40 pound weights. And I have my own ways of using the kettle bells so that I get enough exercise.

Mood

The question of what to do with myself while living at this age remains, so I continue to seek purpose in my daily life. Exercise provides a daily goal and sense of accomplishment. I use an electric tricycle to tour the streets of the neighborhood. This way I see the outdoors and interact with neighbors. I take pleasure in the meals my helper provides and in my conversations with my helper and my sons, who call every day. I also enjoy my memories of my travels in Ethiopia, the Himalayas, and the Andes, and of my many years with my wife, now deceased, who was a wonderful companion and a tireless support.

Mental stimulation

I continue to write papers, mostly personal reflections like this one. Occasionally, I am asked to review papers for medical journals, although such requests have become rare as my expertise narrows compared to contemporary physicians. For fifty years I collaborated with a statistician and together we published more than sixty paper requiring statistical analysis.

I use my computer and an iPad to keep track of the news, and I occasionally take pictures to insert into my writings. I marvel at what seems an endless variety of methods with which my contemporaries amuse themselves. They also have, of course, many new gadgets to do this with. I avoid purchasing new technology, but I enjoy reading novels and stories on my Kindle; this helps to pass the time and mitigates against boredom.

Diet

I fondly remember my sumptuous meals my late wife prepared and those enjoyed during my travels in mountainous regions around the world, in Ethiopia, the Himalayas and the Andes, including a memorable chicken dish without cheese. Now I eat mainly prepared dinners from Trader Joe. But one of my three sons, who lives nearby, invites me for a home-cooked dinner twice a week. I eat only one other meal a day, to control my weight and preserve my health. It includes an antioxidant-rich cocoa made with cocoa nibs and almond milk; fruit; and a bottle of kombucha, which helps to maintain my gut flora.

Reflections on Loneliness

Living alone, I inevitably experience loneliness. This is only partly alleviated by my helper, who is here every day except weekends, and by conversations with my sons and their occasional visits. At 98 I have outlived my wife, other relatives, and close friends. However, I recognize the importance of adapting to this reality too, to continue living meaningfully.

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