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## FROM THE DESK OF THE PRESIDENT

# Progressive Vision and Leadership: The Cornerstone of the North American Spine Society

Philadelphia is well-suited to be the host city for the North American Spine Society's annual meeting and celebration of the Society's 20th anniversary. Both are rich in history with a heritage of born leaders. In just two short decades, the Society has exponentially expanded from a few pioneering colleagues to more than 4,000 spine care professionals from diverse specialties. Unity is the defining characteristic that draws the Society to confront the challenges and problems faced by spine physicians and their patients. Retrospectively, the Society's record mirrors the history of spinal disease itself by being both complex and controversial. Although we strive for an evidence-based approach to treating spinal problems, our knowledge base is slim and much of spinal pain and disease remains a mystery.

It is appropriate at this 20-year mark to reflect on the Society's early days and the odyssey that has brought us together. The journey is never ending and members of the North American Spine Society continue to serve at the forefront of research, invention and education to unravel the mysteries of spinal disease.

### **Legendary Founders**

More than 20 years ago, four determined men from diverse backgrounds who shared common goals united to form the nucleus of what is known today as the North American Spine Society. Possibly the most legendary is orthopedist Leon Wiltse, MD, who was one of 10 children raised on a cattle ranch in North Dakota during the great depression. Well known for his down to earth advice to "use your head," Dr. Wiltse's love of teaching

directed a career enriched by research. Because of his remarkable contributions, we have a better understanding of lumbar spine disease and treatment, including spondylolisthesis, the paralateral approach and pedicle screw instrumentation. Dr. Wiltse's dedication to teaching and education was demonstrated by the fellowship model he set and the 38 fellows he subsequently mentored.

One of Wiltse's first fellows was Vert Mooney, MD. Both shared a fascination with spinal disease. Mooney was at the forefront of ideology and instrumental in educating many spine physicians. His concepts regarding spinal pain and understanding facet syndrome as a diagnostic entity advanced the treatment of spinal disorders. Mooney's talent and notable career included serving as president of both the International Society for the Study of Lumbar Spine and the North American Spine Society.

The understanding of the degenerative process of spinal disease was shaped by Dr. William Kirkaldy-Willis. He was born in the same English village as Henry VIII and spent time in Kenya after medical training, where he was the first to fuse the spine after curettage of a tuberculous abscess. Kirkaldy-Willis is known for developing the concept of the three joint complex and degenerative cascade of the lumbar spine, and for his outstanding contributions to the classification of spinal stenosis and nonsurgical pain management.

Dr. David Selby's career path may have been shaped, in part, by a spinal injury he suffered from a helicopter crash during a military tour in Vietnam. Selby recuperated and became an orthopedic spine surgeon whose masterful technical skills became legendary. His research led to the introduction of water-soluble myelo-

graphic dye to the United States. His nature as a true gentleman and mentor further distinguishes his legacy.

Like these physicians, other legends in the spine community recognized the importance of research and education and championed its cause by example. A short list would certainly include Vernon Nickel, Shannon Stauffer, Jacqueline Perry, Henry Crock and John Kostuik.

In those early years, the practice of medicine in North America was changing, becoming more specialized. Medical specializing fostered change and change brought new challenges. Vision and leadership were needed and Wiltse, Mooney, Kirkaldy-Willis and Selby were there to set the cornerstone for the most prestigious and forward-thinking medical society in America. When it was necessary to calm the often turbulent waters of change, they were there to begin construction of a bridge so solid that its framework continues to support the North American Spine Society today.

### Spine Specialty Emerges

As the spine specialty evolved, the need for educational meetings, auxiliary training and forums for discussion steadily grew. It was apparent that spine physicians required educational opportunities to keep pace with advancing technology. To meet these needs, the Society's founding leaders wanted to create an organization open to all professionals interested in spine care. One of the greatest hurdles during the early days was that of creating unity and "hold(ing) fast on the issues we feel strongly about...", as Dr. Leon Wiltse stated. As its written history\* details, the development of the North American Spine Society proved to be difficult with many unexpected events. The history behind the creation of the Society entailed feats of both leadership and diplomacy.

### Early Turbulence: Discord to Unity

The International Society for Study of the Lumbar Spine (ISSLS) committed research efforts to improve the care of lumbar spine

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disorders. However, membership restrictions in ISSLS disallowed many spine specialists from joining. To broaden opportunities to spine physicians, the North American Academy of Spine Surgeons (NAASS) was launched as a spin-off from ISSLS, to include surgeons, physicians offering nonsurgical care and chiropractors. Despite little support, grass roots efforts strongly emerged and, by 1982, the first documented mention of the name "North American Spine Society" appeared. In 1984, the North American Spine Society included orthopedists, neurologists, neurosurgeons, radiologists, rheumatologists, physiatrists and other professionals who devoted at least 50% of their practice to the lumbar spine. However, the Society's name still had not been carved in stone. Variations such as the "North American Spine Association" (NASA) and "North American Lumbar Spine Association" (NALSA) lingered. In the meantime, in 1985, the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (AAOS) sanctioned formation of the American College of Spinal Surgeons (ACSS).

### Conflicting Interests and Political Agendas

Further, the AAOS formed a Council on Musculoskeletal Specialty Societies (COMSS) and the ACSS applied for membership to gain associate status, as did NALSA. To further complicate matters, the chairman of COMSS found it logical to merge both spine groups, causing discord as personal interests and political agendas were upended. Fortunately, during 1985, the Federation of Spine Associations (FOSA)

provided an opportunity under which both spine societies could converge during an AAOS meeting. In that same year, NALSA adopted their name and relationship with ISSLS and set out to petition the AAOS for representation. The ACSS was invited to join NALSA's organizational structure.

### Blending Principles

Merging the NALSA and the ACSS would not be simple considering their goals and governances differed. Diplomacy was needed. Fortunately, Harry Farfan, MD, a universally recognized physician who was firm and fair-minded, was found to serve as chairman. Through Dr. Farfan's leadership, vision and devotion, the light of unification could finally be seen on the horizon. Once large issues were handled and conflicts quieted, the newly merged society could focus on its goals to promote scientific research and education on topics related to the entire spine, including scoliosis and trauma, with primary emphasis on the lumbar spine. In addition, the society would provide a forum for the development of the complete spine clinician. Following election business, the newly formed and united group chose the name "North American Spine Society."

In two short decades, the society's membership has grown from a mere 50 members to more than 4,000 this year. Award papers and grants have multiplied and funding for research exceeds \$180,000 annually. However, this remarkable growth and progress is measured in much more than mere membership numbers and research dollars.

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## Serving a Greater Purpose

The North American Spine Society has always been an organization with leaders who are visionaries. Beyond pure academia or sharing of scientific information, the Society has been instrumental in establishing guidelines for spine patient care and serves as a voice for patients, physicians, other spine care professionals and health care providers. Its influence and success are seen worldwide in meetings and educational forums it sponsors, the best practices movement to educate its members about patient spine care, advocacy activities, research and clinical care, safety issues, building cooperative relationships with national and international spine organizations, providing patient care in underdeveloped nations, publishing and electronic media and, more recently, the Spine Masters Institute.

## The Spine Masters Institute: Stellar Educational Opportunities

“To educate educators! But the first ones must educate themselves...” are the words of the philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. The Spine Masters Institute will accomplish just that.

The Spine Masters Institute is projected to be the most technologically advanced, state of the art spine educational facility in the world. Its purpose is to educate not only spine specialists, but also the general public and policy makers. The BioSkills lab and multimedia facilities will allow the North American Spine Society to advance spine education to new levels and disseminate this information globally.

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**The Spine Masters Institute is the ideal complement to the North American Spine Society and represents our ever expanding and forward-thinking vision to address education in the global spine community. I invite each and every one of you to become partners in this exciting project, designed to serve our membership.**

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The Institute will occupy approximately one half of the new building purchased by NASS, which will also house its administrative offices. The building and adjacent visitor accommodations are conveniently located in Burr Ridge, Illinois, a short distance from Chicago's O'Hare International Airport.

The BioSkills lab will include a large lecture room, classrooms with ample meeting space, an operating room of the future and comprehensive cadaver work stations. With unlimited video conferencing capabilities, we will be able to project spine courses not only throughout the BioSkills lab, lecture rooms and learning center, but to the world. The facility will be digitally configured with cameras and mixing/editing equipment as well as special sets to film and produce educational broadcasts and video.

Also in development is a digital electronic spine network (DESN) which would allow members and sponsors access to broadcast time. The network would afford users the ability to host live interactions, debates and keynote addresses, and to disseminate public information and other spine worthy news worldwide. We plan

to Webcast NASS CME offerings for physicians and open up the potential for all NASS CME opportunities to be made available directly through [www.spine.org](http://www.spine.org).

In effect, the Institute will be a hub for a complete e-society, designed and established to meet the current and future educational needs of spine physicians, patients and the media.

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I know that as we stride forward to meet tomorrow's challenges and those over the next 20 years, we will continue to accomplish great things together.

Welcome to Philadelphia.

\*Special thanks to Phyllis Anderson and Pam Hayden for their help in compiling the history of NASS, *The North American Spine Society: Celebrating 20 Years of Progress in Spine Care*.