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FROM THE DESK OF THE PRESIDENT

Which Direction Are We Headed?

“Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future.”

Niels Bohr (1885 - 1962)

As I reflect back on the past year, I realize how fast it has gone and how much NASS has accomplished. In this age of communications technology revolution, things get done at lightning speed. So many more things are happening at once, as I am sure any physician can tell you about the pace of their practices. Patient issues, insurance and reimbursement forms, safety concerns, government regulations, hospital politics, competition for patients, keeping up with new medical breakthroughs—it’s exhausting.

As a medical and surgical society, we are always looking for ways to meet and exceed the needs of our members. With the rapid growth of NASS have come many challenges. What is the best way to meet our educational needs? What are the major reimbursement issues we need to be out in front of? What are the key legislative issues affecting us today and in the future? The key to an enduring organization is to understand the successes and failures of the past and to have vision about what the future may hold.

It occurred to me after reading an intriguing book entitled, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* by Jared Diamond, that some of the author’s concepts apply not only to societies in the anthropological sense, but to societies like the North American Spine Society. Essentially, how we address a number of key issues will determine if we will fail or succeed as a society over time. Diamond weaves his theory on the success or failure

of many ancient and present day societies by citing examples of both from the Native American civilizations of the Anasazi and the Maya to the medieval Vikings on Greenland to modern day Rwanda and China. Both types of societies—Diamond’s examples and our NASS—faced five critical sets of factors that may determine our futures: (1) environmental factors and the damage that people inadvertently inflict on their environment, (2) climate change, (3) hostile neighbors, (4) decreased support by friendly neighbors and (5) the question of the society’s responses to its problems.

The medical environment we live in today is quite different than even 10 or 20 years ago. You could say we have undergone significant “global warming” as the entire health care industry has heated up, grown and continues to expand at a double-digit inflation rate. More treatments are available. New technologies are continually developed. More physicians are completing training and entering the workforce.

Diamond describes some societies that were quite fragile environmentally, yet succeeded, where others were quite robust, yet failed, as they exhausted their resources without regard for future generations. The analogy is very clear. We have the ability to do many treatments and provide extensive care, but those resources are not endless. The total amount of money available for health care is not growing in spite of all of our advances in technology. How we determine which treatments are the most effective in terms of human cost and benefit

today may determine what our medical health care environment will look like in the future.

The political and economic climate we live in today changes almost daily. Government regulations are being thrust upon us all the time. How we adapt to those regulations will have a significant impact on how we are paid. As opposed to weather and geographic climate changes, we have some ability to alter our political and economic climate changes by being involved at the regulatory and decision-making levels with the government and payers of health care. Our society (NASS) has continued to work to make our health care climate more favorable by involving key society members on these government and insurance advisory and regulatory committees. The more involved we remain with these organizations, the less impact health care climate changes will have on our practices. We may even have the ability to slow down medical health care “global warming.”

Hostile neighbors can be a problem for societies or professional societies. A society may be able to hold off its enemies as long as it is strong, only to succumb when it becomes weakened for any reason, including environmental damage. The society's collapse may ultimately be caused by eventual weakness; yet the real problem was what caused the once strong society to become weak in the first place. We need to continually evaluate what qualities and attributes make NASS a strong, vibrant, member-driven organization so we do not lose that

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Slightly different than the issues with hostile neighbors is decreased support from friendly neighbors. When times are tough and resources scarce, friendly neighbors, or in our case, other societies and organizations that we may normally work well with, may develop a bunker mentality and withdraw contact, or sometimes cooperation, as they fight for their own piece of the health care pie. It is easy to see how health care has been fragmented and how many different special interest groups are trying to do what is in their best interest as opposed to what is in the best interest of medicine as a whole. The ability to balance cooperative and competitive interests is quite difficult, yet probably essential for long

term survival and success.

The last major factor, and possibly the most critical one, is the ubiquitous question of the society's responses to its problems, whether they are environmental or not. Diamond states “a society's responses depend on its political, economic and social institutions and on its cultural values.” Those institutions and values affect whether the society solves its problems or not.

The North American Spine Society constantly faces new challenges. As long as we continually assess these realities, the hard facts at times, and base our goals and objectives on quality spine care for all, I think we can do a great deal to guarantee our future as a society—hopefully for the good of our human society—and avoid collapse.

Reference

Diamond J. *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. New York, New York: Viking Penguin; 2005.