



Richard D. Guyer, MD
Texas Back Institute
Plano, TX

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FROM THE DESK OF THE PRESIDENT

A Year of Change

It is hard to believe that another year at NASS has passed. It has been an exciting year and a challenging one at the same time. Perhaps one of the most exciting events this year was the opening of the new NASS Headquarters and the Spine Masters Institute. When I arrived in Burr Ridge one evening in March, I was awed by the sight of the illuminated arches above our new building giving it the appearance of a spine with ribs—it gave me goose bumps. NASS has never had a physical identity, until now. NASS moved from three separate locations to the new facility in Burr Ridge, Illinois, which is equidistant from O’Hare and Midway airports. Through the hard work of Eric Muehlbauer, the NASS staff, the Board of Directors and JJ Abitbol, this project has come to fruition. It is a beautiful 40,000 square foot facility which houses all the NASS staff in one location for the first time in nearly eight years. The building also includes a state of the art auditorium with seating for 100+ and a 3,800 square foot bio-skills lab which can accommodate up to 10 fully equipped work stations. Through the generosity of many companies, we have been able to equip this training center with the latest, most high tech equipment. Our goal is to hold weekly courses for up to 2000 NASS members and nonmembers per year ranging from purely didactic to interventional and surgical sessions.

We held our first course on Motion Preservation in May of this year which was a great success. Fortunately, there were no major glitches thanks to our great NASS staff including Lab Manager, Jim Finnerty, and IT staff, Brad Repsold and Bill Popielarczyk. Being a technology geek, I was amazed at the computer infrastructure that Brad has put together at a fraction of the cost by having NASS serve as a show case for some of the latest technologies. Our state-of-art video

conference capabilities and networking make us one of only 20 sites in the country with a 10GB per second transfer capacity—yes that’s 10 gigabytes. (The usual home network speed is 100 megabytes per second, or .1 GB). This allows for endless possibilities of video, voice and data technologies. The network includes, for example, auditorium video cameras that automatically track speakers in the audience and project them onto one or both large screens in the front. We have the ability to transmit conferences to anywhere in the world and broadcast live over the internet. As this technology allows real time recording of speakers and their PowerPoint presentations, participants could leave a meeting with a DVD/CD in hand. Ask Brad for a tour sometime if you visit.

The main corridor of the new NASS building includes space for a museum. While we have a good collection of artifacts, we are looking for donations of displayable items reflecting the history of spine care. If you have something you’d like to donate, please contact the NASS office at 630.230.3600.

NASS’ new headquarters and SMI are the new standard. It is YOUR facility and I would encourage all of you to take advantage of the courses offered or just to visit it.

The medical landscape continues to change and physicians desperately try to negotiate all the challenges wrought by the government and insurance companies. With the upcoming elections, we undoubtedly will see more external pressures. Some economists are now saying it is not the cost of drugs and the insurance companies or how much the patient pays, it is that US physicians are paid too much compared to their colleagues abroad, (Berenson A. Sending Back the Doctors Bill. *New York Times*. July 29, 2007,) On the other hand, states Regina Herzlinger, professor of business adminis-

tration at Harvard Business School and author of *Who Killed American Health-care?*, “physicians are increasingly forced to become salaried employees of hospitals and insurers and are constrained by recipes for the practice of medicine that are cooked up by government and insurance company bureaucrats. The cycle is bringing about the imminent collapse of the medical profession—which gravely endangers our health care system.”

Recognizing these serious issues, NASS leadership has realized that we must adjust our course. With a gift from me to the Board of Jim Collins’ book, *Good to Great*, to inspire us, we set out to determine how NASS can become “great.” This exercise forced us to look introspectively at all that NASS does and does not do. It is critical now more than ever that we focus our resources and examine what and who NASS is. Our revised mission statement reflects these changes:

NASS is a multidisciplinary medical organization dedicated to fostering the highest quality, evidence-based, and ethical spine care by promoting education, research and advocacy.

Our vision is clear: we want to foster quality spine care for our patients. This encompasses educating and giving our membership the tools to become the best possible physicians. This does not mean that we ignore the socioeconomic issues of patient care but rather become more involved to assure these patient oriented goals.

This new mission and vision is such an important issue that I am proud to announce the formation of a new Quality Spine Care Committee that will guide us in achieving our goals whether through data/outcome collection, training, registries, strategic collaborations or possibly physician endorsement.

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We must strive to protect our profession. Government and insurance company pressures must not alter our professionalism or patient relationships.

We have continued to push forward in protecting physician reimbursement and have continued our work with CMS for fusion validation by formalizing the Combined Professional Societies Task Force on Lumbar Fusion with the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, American Association of Neurological Surgeons, Congress of Neurological Surgeons and the Scoliosis Research Society. (See “Spine Community Urges Changes to CMS Draft Assessment of Lumbar Fusion,” May/June *SpineLine*, 2007;8(3):26-27). Such collaboration is important. We have also recently met with the leadership of the American Association of Neurological Surgeons and realize we have more synergies than differences. In fact, we have discussed a multisociety outcomes project, the Quality Spine Care Forum, funded by unrestricted grants from industry and, yes, possibly even the insurance industry. We all have common interests that will evaporate if we don’t take action now.

In that vein, strange as it may seem, we have met with United Health Care and Blue Cross Blue Shield to discuss how they may help us gather meaningful outcome data. As I told you in my previous *SpineLine* messages, we have looked at

many alternatives. Working with insurance companies was the furthest thing from my mind, but we realized that their issues are the same as ours. They are willing to pay for quality medicine but they have no way of measuring this except for their “administrative data” that they collect on all of us. They are interested in registries and developing meaningful outcome data. While we all feel abused by the insurance industry, in this area, their interests clearly coincide with ours and our patients. They may seem to be strange bedfellows, but the times are different and we are moving forward in this effort.

Having been a part of NASS from the beginning (I’ve missed only one annual meeting), I feel like a proud father looking at how NASS has grown up over the last 22 years. I have truly enjoyed leading NASS this past year and have been honored with your support. Of course, the outlook is very bright for NASS with one of the finest Boards of Directors and upcoming Presidential lines. As with any vibrant society, we must continue to be nimble on our feet, re-evaluate, and readjust our course to maintain our wonderful profession. I feel the changes that have taken place this year will ensure our continued success.