HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Pioneer in Advocacy: The Legacy of James J. Peters

Donald R. Bodner, MD; Carolann Murphy, PA

Each year, American Paraplegia Society (APS) honors pioneers who cared for people with spinal cord injury during the time when there was little to offer in terms of medicine and technology. Drs. Ernest Bors, A. Estin Comarr and Donald Munro are memorialized by APS awards for excellence in research, clinical care, and teaching (1–3) that have been awarded since the 1980s. Inspired by the needs of wounded combat veterans, these dedicated physicians fought to establish basic care and research to better their lives. The most recent addition to APS' annual awards—the James J. Peters Memorial Lectureship—honors a very different type of pioneer. Instituted in 2004, this lectureship carries the name of Jim Peters, founder of United Spinal Association (formerly Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association). Peters, an army veteran with spinal cord injury, died in 2002 at age 57. His death followed a stroke he sustained while attending the annual educational convocation of the three associations he founded and nurtured—APS, the American Association of SCI Nurses, and the American Association of SCI Psychologists and Social Workers (AASCIPSW).

Unlike his predecessors, Peters confronted spinal cord injury as a patient, not as a clinician. Peters was a civil engineer who achieved the rank of second lieutenant in the US Army. Injured in 1967 during training at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, in preparation for a tour in Vietnam, Peters underwent rehabilitation at the Bronx VA Hospital, where he was inspired to advocacy by the deplorable conditions. By convincing *Life* magazine to cover this story, he was instrumental in widely publicizing the substandard care of injured veterans, which provoked national outrage (4). Due to his efforts, the Bronx VA would be rebuilt as a modern facility housing the new Spinal Cord Damage Research Center. More than 3 decades later, it would be renamed the James J. Peters VA Medical Center (5). Knowing that research was essential, Peters pushed for centers of excellence in SCI research throughout the VA system of healthcare and provided support for the PVA/EPVA Center for Neuroscience and Regeneration Research at Yale University. His influence was furthered through his membership on the Special Select Commission of Spinal Cord Injury under Presidents Carter and Reagan and his appointment to the New York State Spinal Cord Injury Research Board.

Peters left no avenue unexplored in his quest to better the lives of veterans with SCI. In addition to his focused efforts on clinical care, education, and research, he was a

James J. Peters (1945–2002).

tireless advocate for legislation promoting the rights of the disabled on the local and national levels. As the dynamic executive director of EPVA (now United Spinal Association), his many projects included the drive toward subspecialty certification for spinal cord medicine, which was achieved in 1995. To date, 544 physicians have been certified in SCI medicine by the American Board of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (6). Peters' vision of clinicians specially trained in every aspect of the care of people with spinal cord injury is now a reality.

The inaugural James J. Peters Memorial Lecture was delivered by Peters' successor at United Spinal, Gerard Kelly, in Las Vegas in 2004 (7). This lectureship is just one of many tributes to Peters' memory. In addition to the James Peters VA Medical Center, he is memorialized by the James Peters Veterans Leadership Awards, the James J. Peters Conference Room at Yale University, the VA's James J. Peters Memorial SCI Scholar Award and the James J. Peters Distinguished Service Award given by AASCIPSW.

For Jim Peters, 'life in a wheelchair' meant a life devoted to demanding recognition and respect for people with disabilities. To his deep love for people and the desire to better their lives, he brought empathy, tenacity and boundless energy. No path was unexplored, no obstacle avoided in his quest to advance the care of people with spinal cord injury and the field of spinal cord medicine. His personal brand of advocacy furthered health care, research, education, transportation, housing, and legislation for all people with disabilities.

Peters' strategy was straightforward—he simply refused to accept no for an answer. More than any memorial, this is his legacy.

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Memorial Lecturers 2004–2009

2004 Gerard M. Kelly: *Remembering Jim Peters*

2005 Rory Cooper, PhD: *Carrying the Torch: A Call to Build on the Progress of the Past 25 Years*

2006 William A. Bauman, MD: *Jim's Legacy: Insights Into the Medical Consequences of Spinal Cord Injury*

2007 James J. Weisman, JD: *James J. Peters and the Disability Rights Movement*

2008 Clair Russell Hesselton, PhD: *Advocacy - It is a Collective Effort*

2009 Dennis O'Malley, BS, MHHS: *The Past, Present and Future of SCI Care in America*