

**EDITORIAL****KEEPING PERSPECTIVE**

The vast body of medical knowledge continues to grow each day, alongside a burgeoning number of therapies and diagnostic techniques. In order to keep up to date with these advances, the natural tendency for people in healthcare professions and medical research has been to specialize. One could spend literally all his waking hours reading the specialized literature of his chosen field and still not keep up with the rate of new, directly relevant publications; under such demanding conditions, reading more broadly seems like an extravagance few can afford. And yet, I would argue, such a myopic view of medicine should be defended against.

I was prompted to ponder these issues by the recent United States Supreme Court decision in the case of *US vs. Oakland Cannabis Buyers' Cooperative* (1) which has been seen as a major setback for the medical use of marijuana. The ruling states that "It is clear from the text of the act that Congress has made a determination that marijuana has no medical benefits worthy of an exception." Though not the particular focus of this case, it would appear that exceptions allowing the use of marijuana for medical purposes will not be allowed in the US. This is despite the fact that clear mechanisms for the analgesic actions of marijuana have been described (2) and clinical data show that marijuana can be beneficial for conditions including AIDS, multiples sclerosis, glaucoma, and chronic pain by stimulating appetite, reducing muscle spasms, and helping to manage otherwise intractable pain (3,4). A balanced approach to investigating medical applications while protecting against misuse is obviously necessary (5). Indeed, the Canadian government has chosen to respond to available data differently from the US (6). The point of presenting this example is to show that basic and clinical research may not translate into benefits for our patients if extrinsic factors prevent it. This same point is asserted at a more global level by the fact the HIV/AIDS and other diseases continue to ravage the developing world despite known treatments (7,8).

Medicine does not exist in a social vacuum. This is obvious for clinical medicine and is increasingly true for research where a growing number of ethical and legal issues are coming to the forefront. Clinicians and researchers must play an integral role in debating issues, setting policy, and assuring delivery of the best

possible medical care to the widest number of people. Pursuing these rather ambitious goals requires more than expertise in a very specialized field – it requires broader knowledge and some perspective of medicine as a whole. The real challenge is to find the time and the motivation to achieve and maintain this breadth of knowledge.

Although I would certainly not go as far as to claim that reading the *MJM* alone would suffice to achieve such breadth of knowledge, it is a start. Unlike most journals in this age of specialization, the *MJM* still aims to publish papers that run the gambit from molecular and cellular biology to ethical issues in medicine. The current issue is no exception, with original articles including epidemiological studies in Taiwan and Guyana as well as basic research on the regulation of specific molecules important for angiogenesis. The review articles continue in the biochemical and molecular biological veins, providing overviews of aggression and aging, while the Crossroads articles consider the question of placebo-controlled drug trials from an ethical perspective. This issue's Focus is on aerospace medicine and goes beyond the physiological ramifications of spaceflight to include the development of technology allowing clinical care in space and the non-physiological issues that must be dealt with to ensure the well being of astronauts as they spend increasingly long periods outside the Earth's atmosphere.

Moreover, the *MJM* serves an additional purpose for students who, after years of reading textbooks and being lectured to, may have forgotten that communication, even in academia, is a two-way process. Writing scientific papers is a skill that must be developed and honed, and the *MJM* is proud of the role it can play in encouraging and facilitating this learning process. As always, we encourage students to aspire to the goal of publication and to use the *MJM* as a vehicle towards achieving that goal.

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