

Health Headlines

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Dr. Jim Post

Physician's Own Spinal Cord Injury Helps him Mentor Veterans

On a warm, clear day in July 1985, 14 year old Jim Post stood at the end of a dock, peering into the cool waters of the Lehigh River. He stood among a host of scout leaders and contemporaries, contemplating the shallow water dive that would qualify him for a scouting merit badge. His leap into the water, on that fateful day, would forever change his life. In an unfortunate twist of fate, Jim's dive took him slightly deeper than anticipated, which caused him to hit the bottom of the shallow river. In an

instant, this young athletic, outdoorsman, sustained a paralyzing spinal cord injury, which would immediately propel him into an uncertain and unconventional future.

Thirty years forward, Dr. Jim Post is now an attending Physician in Hemodialysis, at the James J. Peters VA Medical Center. For the purposes of this interview, Dr. Post recalled how the years that followed his injury presented many challenges, not the least of which was attending and completing medical school. Since that time, Dr. Post has drawn upon those experiences to help him mentor the newly injured, as well as those with chronic and serious conditions.

“I was angry and bitter when my doctor told me I would never walk again,” recalls Post, “I was looking forward to driving, going to high school and dating. My life was turned upside down. I was non-compliant with my doctors and therapists because I thought that learning to live life in a wheelchair meant giving into my injury. I wanted to beat paralysis and walk out of the hospital. Anything less, was failure.”

Ultimately, Dr. Post worked through his frustrations and began to focus on making the most of his situation. He credits a spiritual nature and an abiding faith in God as being integral to his change in outlook, and in his rehabilitation. If his patients indicate a spiritual, or religious nature, he gently encourages them to explore their faith as a means to reach past frustration and regret, and to get to a place of hope where healing can take place. Also very important in counseling to disabled and chronically ill patients, is to strike a balance between optimism and realism.

“As a physician, I sometimes have to tell patients that they have cancer, or that they will require hemodialysis for the rest of their lives,” says Post. “Such diagnoses are life altering and can be taken with disbelief and anger. Therefore, when I deliver difficult diagnoses, I balance it carefully with success stories to help a patient remain

optimistic. I try to dispel any false notions, or incorrect information about the treatment, that may be a source of fear.”

Among the most valuable tools in his “doctor/mentor bag” is his experience as a patient.

“I remember everything I was thinking and feeling, just like it was yesterday,” Post recalls, “For young patients, I don't immediately tell them how great life will be in a wheelchair, or how much they can succeed in a wheelchair. Instead, I let them know that I fully understand what they are going through and that with hard work and therapy they will improve. “

Dr. Post draws upon his own experiences to strike a realistic chord of a future, not disabled, but “differently-abled.”

“Young spinal injured Vets are often interested in knowing if they can live a normal life and have children, following their injury,” relates Post. “Being able to tell them about my own children and through experiences in medical school, residency, and getting married, can leave the Veteran with a sense of hope and optimism. It is very rewarding to see a patient smile, and re-gain hope for their future, after sharing my experiences. “

With the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and advances in technology, people with physical disabilities can serve in several capacities once thought impossible. Dr. Post recalled visiting with a medical student shortly after becoming paraplegic, due to spinal cord injury. He noted that she was not sure if it was possible for her to continue, or what specialty she could practice as a paraplegic.

Meeting Jim Post, an accomplished and successful physician with quadriplegia, she was both relieved and optimistic about her chances.

Dr. Post elaborated on how his experiences have shaped his patient care: “My experience as a patient and living with a chronic disability has been as useful as my stethoscope in understanding and caring for my patients. It allows me to empathize with their greatest concerns, predict how they will follow through with treatments, and ultimately treat them in a more holistic manner.”

It is clear that Dr. Post has made the most of the changes that transformed him in those early years. His efforts to move forward in the face of almost overwhelming adversity, have been turned into lessons that are shared as he treats and mentors his patients.

“Mentoring to my patients is as much a responsibility, as it is a pleasure,” declares a very humble Jim Post, “As they say, ‘To whomever much is given, of him much will be required,’ and I’ve been very lucky.”

Indeed, Dr. Post, and we are very lucky to have you here, caring for our Veterans.

End

Editors Note: Dr. Jim Post is currently building a webpage that will serve as a “go-to” site for individuals with acute spinal injury or chronic disabilities. With this webpage, he hopes to use his own difficulties and successes to help others overcome their disabilities and lead a fulfilling life.

For more information related to this story, or the James J. Peters VA Medical Center, please contact Jim Connell, Public Affairs Officer, at 718.584.9000, ext. 6620