

## How I Got Here and Why We Should All Stay

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AAPM&R President

ello my fellow Academy members. I am humbled to be the 82nd president of your Academy. For those who do not yet know me, I will use my inaugural presidential column in *The Physiatrist* to share with you my improbable journey in physiatry. A story of doubt, and then commitment.

Growing up in New York City in the 1970s, music clubs like CBGB were venues for new groups to perform, including one of my faves, Talking Heads. In 1980, Talking Heads released, *Once in a Lifetime*, a song that challenges the idea of what's truly valuable, and leaves one pondering the lyrics, **"And you may ask yourself, well, how did I get here?"**

Let me rewind the clock to my second year of residency at the University of Washington. I convinced myself that PM&R did not command enough of a scientific basis to stimulate me for the next three decades of my career. Instead, I determined that my true calling was in forensic pathology – a field that I believed represented true science. I was going to be a regular *Quincy* (for you youngsters unfamiliar with that reference, YouTube the actor Jack Klugman playing an LA County forensic pathologist in a 1970s popular television series). The fact of the matter was that I applied and was accepted into a pathology residency program in Boston; but at the decision deadline, I reversed course and stayed in Seattle. I so clearly recall sheepishly meeting with my chair, Justus Lehmann, MD. He was one of the pillars of physiatry – a no-nonsense, starched white shirt-wearing and very principled individual – who to my great surprise and serendipity, cordially welcomed me back home.

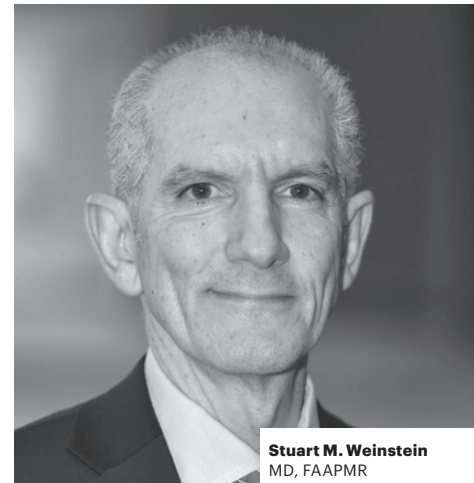
So, it was going to be physiatry or bust. But I was now heading into somewhat uncharted territory with my renewed goal to become a nonsurgical "sports medicine" physician. And again kismet was on my side as I found my mentor, Stanley Herring, MD, FAAPMR – a pickup-driving, Texas-drawling, storytelling, very clever, and already successful sports medicine physiatrist (with a Super Bowl ring)! He had a **bold** vision of how physiatrists would uniquely fit into the rubric of musculoskeletal care. Stan was from Amarillo and our upbringings could not have been more different, but we developed a bond that has kept us working together for more than 30 years.

Yet, in the early 1990s, I did not really appreciate the opportunities ahead of me. My first foray into Academy participation was through *PASSOR* (again, for those too

young to remember, that is an acronym for the *Physiatric Association of Spine, Sports and Occupational Rehabilitation*). *PASSOR* became the Academy home for physiatrists whose clinical focus was musculoskeletal medicine. The organization quickly grew to nearly 1,500 members. This demonstration of our diversity was fascinating, but also potentially divisive, as there was an undercurrent of *PASSOR* seceding from the Academy. As I moved up the *PASSOR* leadership, I lobbied against such a potential break-up. To me, the importance and value of musculoskeletal medicine to our specialty was very clear, and with contemporaneous surveys showing that nearly half of the Academy's members self-identified as providing MSK care, this strength in numbers meant a new direction for the Academy. Reintegration seemed the right course. Some of my peers were not happy with that direction and continue to hold grudges. But I stay true to the belief that we were, and remain, too small a specialty to thrive, or even survive, as smaller independent factions. And, we had (have) a lot more in common than we have differences.

This mini revolution led directly to the development of the Academy Council system (historical note: I was designated as the chair of the Academy Integration Workgroup that facilitated the design of the original Council model), and subsequent evolution into our current, more unified membership communities. And circle back to the reason I was going to leave physiatry during my residency, I next committed to becoming *PM&R's* (the *Purple Journal*) founding editor-in-chief (EIC), with the long-term vision of advancing the scientific and evidential base of our specialty. During my term as EIC, I had the opportunity to sit as an ex-officio member on the AAPM&R Board of Governors. During that decade, I received quite an education as to the complexities of our organization and our specialty. I watched us ride a wave of challenges and opportunities, and look to our past while envisioning our future. So at the end of my editorial tenure, when I was nominated to join the Academy leadership, it seemed as natural to me as becoming a forensic pathologist.

My original assumption that physiatry would not satisfy me was clearly misguided. At that time, I did not appreciate the incredible value in the *how* – not just the *what* – of healthcare delivery. Physiatrists absolutely shine in both elements. So fast forward to the present (the era of COVID-19), we have another opportunity to prove that physiatrists are *essential*, *indispensable*, and *vital* to the broader community of medicine.



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To that end, these are my important areas of emphasis for 2021:

- **Solidify the Academy membership** – now is the time for cohesion, not divisiveness, if we expect to remain relevant;
- **Remain committed to, and proud of, our unique contributions to medicine** – ramp up efforts to demonstrate our value to our stakeholder establishment, including recognizing our patients as strategic partners;
- **Embrace new diagnostic and therapeutic technologies** – but continue to respect the evidence and science; and
- **Trust the process** – you may not agree with every decision that the Board decides, but I assure you that the Board is evolving:
  - **To be more representative of you, the members;**
  - **To be more connected to your issues and concerns;**
  - **To advocate for and fight battles with you; and**
  - **To envision how you will thrive in your future.**

Those who have known me are aware of my fascination with space, space travel, and the enigmatic concept of parallel universes. And with that in mind, I have identified one saving grace about the travel restrictions foisted upon us due to the COVID-19 pandemic – more time to binge watch the various *Star Trek* series on Netflix. After the seemingly millionth time, I still get chills listening to William Shatner (as Captain James T. Kirk) orate, "Space: The final frontier. These are the voyages of the *Starship Enterprise*. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilizations. To **boldly** go where no man has gone before!"

We are certainly navigating through unique times and 2021 is going to be quite a ride. I implore you to stay focused, stay confident, and stay committed!