

Harrington Lecture

Art Is Long, Life Is Short: Lessons Learned in the Life of a Spine Surgeon

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Ten years ago, the Society honored me by electing me to serve as your president, and again, last year, by giving me the Lifetime Achievement Award. And it honors me again this year by allowing me to deliver this prestigious Harrington Lecture. But most of all, SRS has honored me these past 41 years, by welcoming me, an immigrant from Iran, and more importantly, by supporting, challenging, and guiding me as a member of the SRS global family. So, I want to begin by thanking you. Thank you, for all you have done and all you have been for me over these many, many years. I would also like to thank Marc Asher for his help

and for his excellent book, *Dogged Persistence: Harrington, Post-Polio Scoliosis, and the Origin of Spine Instrumentation*, which I highly recommend to all of you. I am truly honored to deliver this Harrington Lecture today. Harrington was a true role model for all of us and an inspiration for me personally. His persistence, mentoring, and the principles he believed in carry as much value today as they did during his time.

In many ways, the Scoliosis Research Society has been and remains my second family, my second home. I have grown up professionally and intellectually in this society. It has also taught me invaluable lessons, some of which I'd like to share with you today: lessons I have learned while growing as a surgeon and researcher and, more importantly, as a person. If you've been part of the Society for any length of time, I suspect your experience will resonate with mine. And if you're new to the Society, I promise that you have much to look forward to.

The **first lesson** I would like to bring up is something we all have to learn when we're starting out: the value of being mentored. Being mentored is a true gift. It begins when someone more experienced and wiser offers you guidance and support, and it continues through to the time when you then begin mentoring others.

After completing medical school in Tehran, I moved with my wife to the United States, where we were both to continue our training in our respective medical fields. I felt, in many ways, as though I had been set loose into this wide world. Of course, I wasn't entirely set loose: I still had to complete an internship, residency, and fellowship. To be honest—although I was careful not to show it—I was more than a little intimidated. Fortunately, I met great mentors along the way: Crawford Campbell, my residency chairman, and Howard Steel, my chief at Philadelphia Shriners, were two of them. They took me under their wings. They became my mentors, my advisors, and my role models, just as Paul Harrington was for Jesse Dickson. They raised my interest in research and helped me obtain a spine fellowship at Twin Cities Scoliosis Center in

Minnesota with Dr. John Moe and his colleagues, who, in turn, became mentors.

All of these individuals guided me through those early, formative years. Yet they never really stopped mentoring me. After I completed my residency and fellowship, I returned to Iran to live and work in my homeland, the country where I was born and where my family lived. Iran badly needed trained spine surgeons, especially for spinal deformity. It was an exciting time for me. I helped the residency education, started a spine fellowship program, and established a center of excellence for scoliosis for the entire country. I invited my mentors to my hospital in Iran, and they came and supported several educational activities. They advised me how to provide the best care I could for my patients and establish quality academic and research programs.

About this time, my country experienced great political change, as many of you already know. In September of 1980, I attended the SRS meeting in Chicago as I had regularly made that trip annually, and shared my challenges with my mentors. They shared their empathy and, more importantly, they acted. They advised me to stay with them for a year to do research. Then they set things in motion: they arranged a place for me to work and for my family to live. It was as if my family in the Society was looking out for me. It may seem as if they were going above and beyond, but that is exactly what mentors do. They offer support and guidance, and they also challenge us exactly when and how we need it. I wouldn't be where I am today—I wouldn't be who I am today—without mentors like Crawford Campbell, Howard Steel, John Moe, and many others, who have been there for me, both professionally and personally throughout my career.

If you're just starting out in this field, know that you don't have to do it alone. And you shouldn't.

First, ask for help. Trust me, you will find that we are here for each other. Second, watch how others do what they do and learn from them. Ask them about their careers and lives and the choices they have made. And finally, stay in touch with them. Follow their careers and keep them in the loop about yours. You may find, as I have found, resources you never knew were available, support and guidance you always wanted, and challenging advice that pushes you to new heights. It's not just what mentors tell you to do, it's what they, themselves, do. Their actions, their behavior, their examples will teach you even more than their words. When you need help, ask for it. Don't assume you have to do it on your own. Don't be too proud, too shy, or too afraid to ask for help. Your mentors want to help. To this day I still find myself asking in certain situations, "What would Dr. Moe or Dr. Steel do?"

The **second lesson** I'd like to share is one we need and come to learn more in the middle of our career. It's the need to establish a reasonable balance in our lives. There comes a time when our research and surgical practices take root and begin to blossom. In my thirties, I was thriving both

professionally and intellectually. The endless potential and possibilities that I faced in my earlier years had in so many ways become a reality: more patients, more surgeries, more research, more publications, more presentations. More. More. More. And then one day the more, more, more became enough! Then too much!

A call I got one night from my wife made this "too much" all too clear. I was living in Minnesota, completing my fellowship, while she had stayed in New York with our three small children. Earlier that day, they were on the elevator at a department store, when a man, a stranger, entered and smiled at the kids. My three-year-old daughter, Ladan, looked up at him and asked, "Are you my Daddy?" You can imagine how the conversation with my wife went that evening! With the encouragement of Bob Winter, one of my mentors, I flew home that weekend to reacquaint myself with my children, and to save my marriage. I am happy that I did, since I am still married to the love of my life after nearly 50 years.

Balance is a lesson we all have to learn, whether in our academic activities, patient care, or our personal life. We want to be good at it all. We want to please our mentors and to be respected by our peers. But we must start by realizing that true balance comes from within, from trusting that we are doing our best and that is the best we can do. Yes, our professional growth requires commitment, dedication, and sacrifice. If you're not willing to give yourself fully to mastering this field, honing your skills, learning more and more and more, you're in the wrong field. And yet—at the same time—you're never going to thrive in this field without having and nurturing your personal life—spending time with family and friends, and cultivating interests apart from the field of medicine.

Both from my own experience and from watching my colleagues, I know and recognize that achieving this balance of work and life isn't easy. It's not something that you can accomplish once and for all, and be done with it. I'm still working on balancing my work and personal life to this day and some days are better than others. But, that's what makes it a lesson! It requires daily attention. When it comes to your career, I would encourage you to never stop learning. There's nothing more dangerous than thinking you know it all. Keep researching. Keep practicing. Keep attending these SRS meetings and communicate with your colleagues and mentors. Never stop learning. But also always remember that there is a life—a good, rich, and satisfying life—beyond academia and surgery. After all, what's the point of all the achievements and accolades your hard work may bring you if you lose your soul in the process?

In some ways, this lesson is tied to the first—as it is a lesson I learned from my mentors and colleagues in the Society: the benefit and blessings of finding balance in work and life.

The **third lesson** I want to share, which comes later in our professional life, is also related to the first one I

introduced earlier, only reversed. It has to do with the value of being a mentor. Just as there are many benefits to being mentored by others—as I am sure many of you here have experienced throughout your careers—there are several advantages to mentoring others.

Two of the values of mentoring, in particular, stand out. One is the sense of deep satisfaction that comes from sharing with a younger generation what an older generation first shared with you. It makes you realize—at least it has made me realize—that we (this family I’ve been talking about) carry with us an important heritage. We inherit knowledge and wisdom, skills and techniques, from the people who have traveled this path before us. And we add our own contributions as we pass this heritage on to those coming after us. In 1676 Isaac Newton remarked, “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” There comes a time when we receive the privilege of lifting people onto our own shoulders, not just so they can do what we have done and see what we have seen, but so that they may accomplish even more, surpassing our greatest achievements, and seeing beyond what we see now.

The second value of being a mentor may sound paradoxical. We can actually learn new things from the very people we mentor. A young surgeon I was mentoring invited me to join him on an outreach trip in Chihuahua, Mexico, a program run by the Global Spine Outreach and San Diego Spine Foundation, for the children of the region who have no access to the resources we take for granted.

I wished to accompany him and the group to support the program. But there was something about the place, the devoted and dedicated volunteers and staff, the patients and families, the way everyone interacted with each other in such a selfless and compassionate way—it touched me deeply and reminded me profoundly of why I became a spine surgeon in the first place. It was an enlightening experience for me, and well beyond even my already great expectations of this burgeoning surgeon. I have found that to be true time and again: whenever I give to others what I have received myself, I receive even more in return.

By the way, I was just in Mexico again this past month. Our volunteer team performed many surgeries. After a long surgery on a 12-year-old girl, who had one of the most severe cases of scoliosis I have seen, every part of my body

ached, and I thought to myself, maybe I’m too old for this! Then a day later, in rounds, the mother left her daughter’s bedside and ran up to hug me. She was in tears but smiling at the same time, thanking us for what we had done for her daughter. It made it all worthwhile.

To reiterate the points I have made today: First, when we are starting out, it is essential to connect with a mentor. Then in the middle of our careers, the real challenge is to find balance. And finally, in our later years, the time comes for us to do for others what those before us first did for us: to be a mentor to the next generation. These are only some of the benefits I have gained over my 41 years of attending the Scoliosis Research Society. I hope, through these reflections, I have also been able to convey some of the reasons why I am so grateful and feel so indebted to this Society, which fosters a culture in which such lessons are embraced and encouraged. And I hope—I trust—that you have benefited as well.

I would like to conclude my remarks by reflecting on the beginning of the medical treatise of Hippocrates’, where he states “Art is long; life is short.” The Greek word, “Arts” which translates to English as *art* originally meant technique or craft, as in the art of war, not fine art. I believe—and perhaps I learned this the hard way—that Hippocrates meant it takes a long time to acquire and perfect our craft as physicians and we have but a short time in which to practice it. When you think of how long it takes to master our craft compared to how long we get to practice it, you might feel discouraged. But that is only if you consider mastering our craft and its practice as two different realities, as if one only begins when the other has ended. In truth, however, we are always learning, always practicing, always being mentored, always mentoring. Even at my age—especially at my age! I can tell you that life is short. But what matters is not the length of our respective lives, but the satisfaction we find within them. I have found great satisfaction in the work I have been privileged to do, in the patients who have honored me with their trust, and in my relationships with my mentors and colleagues.

I hope you can say the same or that you will be able to, especially if you have not reached my stage in your career. **Art is long; life is short. Make the most of it.** Thank you.