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Physical
therapy
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► See page 3



It's not about the chair



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Medical students hear from quadriplegics about their lives.

► See page 12-13

It's not about the chair: Quadriplegics tell Wright State medical students how they want to live and be treated

By **CAROLE JUDGE**
For Health Care Today

It's not often you find an engaged couple, a stay-at-home mother, a young student, an auto mechanic or an industrial engineer teaching at a medical school, but once a year, classes at Wright State University welcome these adjunct instructors. Each participant has suffered a spinal cord injury.

Introducing each visitor is David B. Shuster, MD, medical director of the Rehabilitation Institute of Ohio at Miami Valley Hospital. As a physical medicine and rehabilitation physician, board-certified in spinal cord injury medicine and medical director of the spinal cord team at Miami Valley Hospital, Shuster admitted that these people have taught him a lot.



David B. Shuster, MD

Shuster began each session, informing the classes that these individuals, once his patients, are now his friends.

"I want you to meet people with spinal cord injuries, because they are the best people to teach you about spinal cord injury, and the best people to teach you what's important as a physician as far as what you display to the patient," he said. "They've been on the other side, looking up at the doctors and nurses. They can tell you what you can do best to communicate with people like them and how you can help them."

Shuster reminded the medical students that this will be their job with all patients, not just those with spinal cord injuries.

Leading the panel was Jim Rackett, a senior industrial engineer at A.K. Steel and founder of the Southern Ohio Wheelchair Tennis Club. Accompanying him is Traci Rackett, his wife of three years who works at Wright State's off-campus research department, where she supervises functional electrical stimulation research. This research enables people with paralysis to ride a stationary bicycle and analyzes the effects of improved physical fitness on participants.

"I'm here to tell about my experiences," said Rackett, who has been Shuster's patient since he sustained a spinal cord injury falling from a roof 11 years ago. "I'm also here to give them a practical understanding of what they may see after they graduate."

Traci added, "They're learning the anatomy and physiology from the books, but we're here to tell them about the trials and

tribulations of everyday life, including things we've discovered and about how good life can be after a spinal cord injury."

Kelly Stant commands attention for what she adds to the panel. Not only does she bring nine years of experience as a paraplegic; she brings her 1-year-old daughter.

"It's interesting for them to see that I can have a child and that I can do all this myself," said Stant.

Stant is never too shy to help the aspiring doctors become comfortable with subjects relating to women with spinal cord injuries, including sex.

"That's what you really want to know about, right?" asked Stant, who was greeted with agreement and laughter. This wife and mother also shared her feelings about the doctors she encountered who never talked down to her and addressed her, not just her parents, during her hospitalization.

Tony Peth had been an athletic student in a biomedical science doctoral program in San Diego. He returned to Dayton following a compression injury that left him a C5 quadriplegic. His fiancée, Ashley Porter, a dancer with a local ballet company, joined him on the panel to offer insight into the role she played as they went through his injury rehabilitation together. Recently, they were featured on the cover and in a story for Miami Valley Hospital's *Pro Health* magazine.

"By sharing my experiences, they can get a better understanding of what we go through on a daily basis," said Peth, who believes that a good doctor needs to clearly understand the physiology of 'what's going on.' Peth is executive director of Rapid Motion, a nonprofit organization he founded that currently supports disabled athletes, with future plans to open an athletic facility for people with spinal cord injuries. The inspiration behind Rapid Motion's motto — Reconnecting the Spinal Cord



Community — encompasses Peth's vision of offering support, education, and physical training.

Heather Whitener had just graduated from high school when she dove into a shallow swimming pool and sustained a

C4-5 compression injury. Admitting to several years of depression, Whitener, a student at Wright State working toward a degree in counseling, is also employed by the YMCA.

"I try to have an active life and a social life," says Whitener, who arrived late for a



Above, Kelly Stant with her daughter Alexis, 1, demonstrates how she manages parental tasks from her chair. At left, Jim and Traci Rackett. He is founder of the Southern Ohio Wheelchair Tennis Club.

panel discussion.

"I love it when people are too busy for this kind of thing," said Shuster, who is pleased to witness individuals moving on with their lives following a spinal cord injury.

Daryl Williams, an auto body mechanic from Cleveland and now a student at Wright State, was also too busy to participate in each of the four panel discussions but stayed long enough to offer one group a valuable lesson in protocol.

"Don't step on my chair, that's disrespectful. Nobody would come up to you and put their foot on your knee. I want to be treated like a person, a normal person," insisted Williams, whose C3-4 injury is the result of a gunshot wound. Williams, who said, "I'm from an area where there are few people in wheelchairs," finds a lot of support in the Wright State and Dayton communities. He recently founded CHOICES, a support group for people with spinal cord

injuries that meets the first Thursday of every month at Miami Valley Hospital. Each member of the panel brought a different perspective and lifestyle. This helped to demonstrate the leading point each hoped to pass along to the classes of future physicians.

"The main thing I think is important for you to remember is that every spinal cord injury and every person is different. Just because someone might be paralyzed at the same level, like I'm a T4-6, I can have different sensations than someone with an injury at the exact same level," said Rackett, who further explained how contributing factors, like age and how an injury occurred, can affect an individual's response.

"The one thing that ticks us off more than anything is when you go to see the



Above, Tony Peth, executive director of Rapid Motion, and his fiancée, Ashley Porter, at left, medical students listen attentively to the speakers, far left, Heather Whitener, who suffered a C4-5 compression injury just after high school, speaks with the aspiring physicians.

At a glance

Southern Ohio Wheelchair Tennis Club

▶ (937) 748-9058
▶ www.sowtc.usclargo.com

Rapid Motion

▶ (937) 428-0474
▶ www.rapidmotion.net

CHOICES - The Miami Valley Hospital Spinal Cord Injury Support Group

▶ (937) 208-6299
▶ First Thursday of each month

doctor and you're a T4 paraplegic and they assume X, Y, Z, instead of having a more in-depth discussion in order to figure more out," Rackett said. "No two spinal cord injuries affect people the same way. Like Christopher Reeve is finding out, it's a complicated problem. It can make your input as a doctor very difficult."

Peth said, "My injury was similar to Heather's compression injury, but you learn quickly how to figure out what works above and below the injury and what nerves are controlling what."

Peth's physiology background allows him to better understand his injury. He pointed out how he has less use of his fingers and hands than Whitener, although they are classified as injured at the same level.

In describing the extent of his injury, Peth asked the medical students, "What do you lose when you lose your sympathetic nervous system?" Peth went on to explain how his cardiac output is limited by lack of sympathetic input and how thermo-regulation is controlled by sympathetic output to

the sweat glands. "If I spend a lot of time wheeling around on a hot summer day, I don't have the active sympathetic input, so I overheat."

"It's the same thing for me," confirmed Rackett, who said he only sweats down to the level of his injury. "I play wheelchair tennis and run a tennis club. We always schedule the quadriplegics in the morning because of their limited sweat potential."

The panel discussed other health risks associated with spinal cord injuries, including urinary tract infections and pressure sores. Participants stressed working with their physicians as a team on prevention.

When asked what advice he would give to a newly paralyzed person, Rackett said he would insist they concentrate on the 90 percent of things they can do instead of the 10 percent of things they can't. Peth interjected, "And find people who are already doing all those things!"

"People always think it's about walking again, but I'll bet all of us would chose having bladder and bowel control over walking," stressed Rackett, who wagered that he could get from here to there faster than anyone else could, although he has more problems with personal functions.

Peth concurred saying, "I have a nurse come in every morning. It's been quite a challenge gaining physical control. We had to train my body to go to the bathroom once a day. You have to have control over what, when and where you eat."

The panelists agreed that working with spinal cord injuries must be one of the more rewarding careers in the medical field.

"You're not dealing with a degenerative disease where your patients continually get worse," said Rackett, who believes that with the right doctors, therapists and a good attitude, a patient will always improve. "Life starts over the first day of your spinal cord injury. You need to convey to your patients that everyday you can learn something to constantly make your life better. I can't stress enough how important your roles will be in getting people back to doing what they want to do!"

The unusually warm November weather brought one class outside, where wheelchairs buzzed by with regularity on this highly accessible campus.

The group gathered beneath a bust of Hippocrates that reads, "With purity and with holiness I will pass my life and practice my art."

To these future physicians, that message could not be more inspiring than the real life lessons imparted by the men and women willing to share their knowledge, pain, and triumphs.

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