

Longevity in Surgery

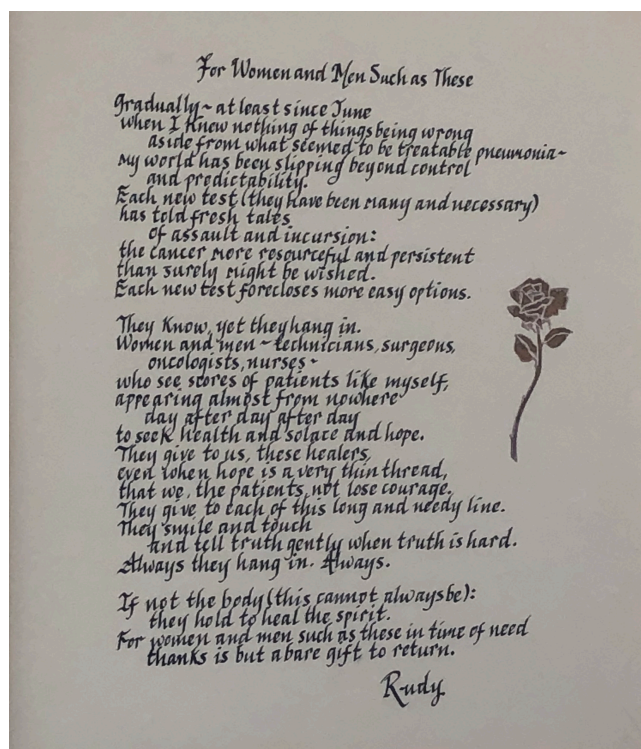
A Conversation with Two Temple Surgeons About How They Continually Find Joy in Their Careers

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For over 25 years, the poem, “For Women and Men Such as These” (right) has remained a stalwart fixture in Dr. John Daly’s office. The poem was written and gifted to him by Rudy, a part-time minister being treated by Dr. Daly for cholangiocarcinoma, an invasive cancer of the bile ducts. His tumor was successfully removed by Dr. Daly and he lived “without knowledge of any recurring cancer for five years” until the cancer returned. Unfortunately, despite aggressive treatments, Rudy lost his battle with cancer. To Dr. Daly, Rudy and his poem embody the “highs and lows” that cancer patients experience. As a physician and with each subsequent patient he treated, Dr. Daly has learned to “accept the highs and deal with the lows”.

Dr. Daly is the current interim dean at Lewis Katz School of Medicine at Temple University and has been a surgical oncologist for over 25 years. He is a clean-cut man with winter white hair, a soft, friendly smile, and a voice that captures your attention. While describing his decision to pursue a career in oncology, he reflects that “if I didn’t have this, I’m not sure what I would do”. Oncology has allowed him to develop long-term commitments to his patients, where he becomes like a family doctor to both the patient and their family. With that connection comes tremendous emotional investment. Dr. Daly celebrates and rejoices “the highs” with them, but also “comes outside of himself during the tremendous lows” to comfort them in times of need. He has treated thousands of patients over his career, and each one has left their own unique mark, making him more humble and grateful for their connection.

“I never have to wake up and wonder if I’m doing something that matters”, Dr. Michel Pontari starts. As he sits across from me in his white coat with a calm and inviting demeanor, he pulls out lollipops that he keeps in a bowl in his office and offers me one. An antidote to a long day. Self-described as an “out of work guitar player”, he has spent his entire career as an academic surgeon



at Temple University Hospital. When he describes his experiences at Temple, his back straightens slightly. He expresses his deep pride and gratitude for the urology department that he helped build and for the patients that he has the privilege of treating every day.

Both Dr. Daly and Dr. Pontari describe the stress and pressure that comes with a long career in patient care, however intertwined with the stress is their overwhelming gratitude and joy for surgery. Maintaining that perspective for medicine and patient care has required two things: community and an outlet. Dr. Daly and Dr. Pontari expressed the need to be able to share their anxieties and struggles with someone to process the stress, the difficulties, and the demands of a surgical career.

For Dr. Daly, opening up to his family helps him decompress and unpack the emotions that are tucked away during a busy day in the operating room. “It would be a detriment to keep all of that inside and that will

hurt you in the long run.” Having a community with which to share the emotional burden allows him to maintain perspective of his career and patient care. Dr. Daly’s wife was his rock, his confidant, and his best friend. For 13 years of Dr. Daly’s career, his wife was sick with stage 4 appendiceal cancer. He describes caring for her “rather aggressively” during her sickness. Recalling the numerous times he delivered test results to his wife, “the highs and lows” became immensely personal. He felt that his two worlds had collided. He had to learn to balance his roles as both a healer and a husband to care for his wife. When his wife passed, he experienced a time of “tremendous emotions” that confirmed his need for a support system. “You have to be able to talk about it with others”, Dr. Daly states. “You surround yourself with people, share your stories and emotions, and let that community support you.”

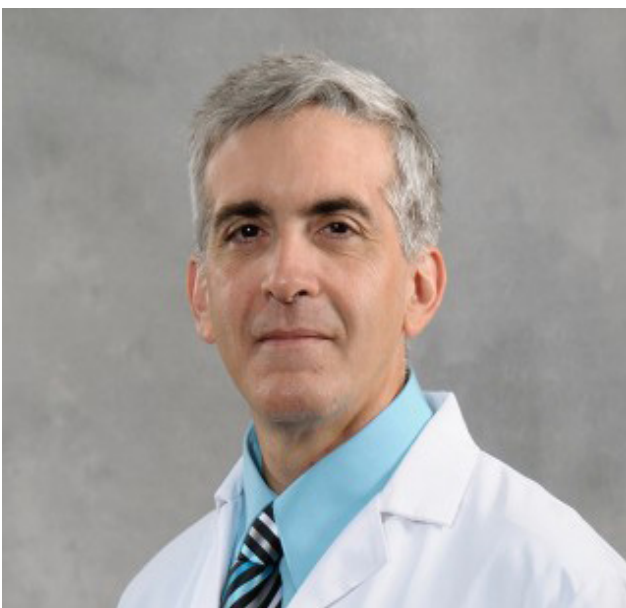
Conversely, for Dr. Pontari, it is imperative to “not bring the job home.” There is a distinct separation, both physically and mentally, of the hospital and home. The people that he believes understand the demands of the job the most are colleagues. “It is very difficult to describe to someone who is not in surgery the pit in your stomach when something goes wrong.” Having strong connections with his colleagues provides the space for him to share his concerns and allows for deep reflection in order to process and prepare oneself for the next patient.

Family and colleagues allow both Dr. Pontari and Dr. Daly to consistently reflect and express their feelings, however both described the necessity to clear their minds and escape the pressures each day can bring. As a guitar player turned surgeon, music has remained an

outlet that has allowed Dr. Pontari to unwind and take his mind off his worries from the OR. Having this musical outlet that brings him such happiness allows him to “maintain positivity and bring that attitude to work each day.” With a big smile, he pulls out a picture of the guitar near his bed. “I keep my guitars near my bed and in the living room to ensure that I play frequently. I’ll get home from work and sit with my wife and play before bed.” His guitars give him something to look forward to at the end of the day. His music grounds him to life outside of the hospital, especially after a long day of work.

A commonality between the two surgeons was their need to work out the stresses of the job with physical activity. As Dr. Daly describes, “It is hard to think of much when you are short of breath on a treadmill.” After his wife passed, he used exercise as an important tool to calm his mind and distract from the overwhelming amount of emotions he felt. “I use exercise often to clear my head”, Dr. Pontari says. “Yesterday was a long day, so I went to the gym at 8pm to get the endorphins flowing.” For both, exercise is key for decompression and distress.

“My favorite word is equanimity”, Dr. Pontari states. “If I had a yacht, I’d name it that.” No yacht yet, but it is clear these two surgeons have found their way to equanimity in their careers. Through deep connections and enjoyable hobbies, they describe being able to feel steady in the face of ever-changing medicine and patient situations. Reflecting on their careers, both speak of the importance in understanding there is little control in the situations that you face. To gain that perspective, you need people to share with and you need to be able to clear your thoughts.



Dr. Michel Pontari



Dr. John Daly