



Southwest Chapter

AMWA Southwest Chapter Newsletter

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Annual Membership Appreciation Event

Speakers: John James, PhD, Chief Toxicologist, Johnson Space Center, NASA; and Grace Kuo, PharmD, MPH, Assistant Professor, Department of Family and Community Medicine, Baylor College of Medicine, and Program Director, Southern Primary-care Urban Research Network

Date: March 19, 2007 (Monday)

Time: 5:30 – 7:00 p.m.

Place: Majors Scientific Books
7205 Fannin, Houston, Texas

Learn about the latest developments in improving patient safety and preventing medication errors from our two speakers, Drs. John James and Grace Kuo, at the membership appreciation event.

John James, PhD, is trained in pathology and has been a board-certified toxicologist for 20 years. He is the chief toxicologist at NASA's Johnson Space Center, responsible for air quality in all of NASA's space vehicles and future habitats. His current interests include the toxicity of lunar dust and the ethical aspects of developing and using nanotechnology, especially carbon nanotubes.

Dr. James has been interested in patient safety since a tragedy in his own family in 2002. He believes that better communication between patients and their physicians will enhance patient safety. One way to accomplish this is by increasing cooperation between patients and physicians in making health care decisions. In his talk, Dr. James will focus on the need for improved patient access to medical records, more meaningful informed consent, continuing medical education, and patient participation in the Texas Medical Board, the licensing body for all physicians in Texas. He has contacted the Texas Legislature about new laws on these issues and will discuss legislation in progress.

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Grace Kuo, PharmD, MPH, is an assistant professor in the Department of Family and Community Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine and the program director for the Southern Primary-care Urban Research Network (SPUR-Net), a practice-based research network in Houston. Dr. Kuo specializes in primary care pharmacy and serves as the principal investigator for the following studies: *The Effect of EMR [Electronic Medical Record] on Medication Safety* and *Safe Use of Medications in Primary Care Practices*, supported by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, and *Effects of Literacy on Medication Safety in the Elderly*, funded by National Institutes of Health. She also provides medication counseling and consultation services for chronic disease management by referral from faculty physicians.

Dr. Kuo is an editorial board member for the *American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy*, *BioMed Central Osteopathic Medicine and Primary Care*, and *Communication Studies*. For her study entitled, *Collaborative Drug Therapy Management Services and Reimbursement in a Family Medicine Clinic*, she received the Literature Award for Innovation in Pharmacy Practice in Health Systems from the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists Foundation. Dr. Kuo is a coauthor of the Institute of Medicine Committee's *Preventing Medication Errors*, released in December 2006. She will present a summary of this report at the membership appreciation event.

Drs. James and Kuo recommend the following books on patient safety and medication errors, some of which are available online:

- Kohn LT, Corrigan JM, Donaldson MS, eds. *To Err Is Human: Building a Safer Health System*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2000. Available at www.nap.edu/catalog/9728.html.
- Institute of Medicine. *Crossing the Quality Chasm: A New Health System for the 21st Century*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2001. Available at www.nap.edu/catalog/10027.html.
- Aspden P, Corrigan JM, Wolcott J, Erickson SM, eds. *Patient Safety: Achieving a New Standard for Care*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2004. Available at www.nap.edu/catalog/10863.html.
- Bartlett DL, Steele JB. *Critical Condition: How Health Care in America Became Big Business—and Bad Medicine*. New York, NY: Broadway Books; 2006.
- Board on Health Care Services and Institute of Medicine. *Performance Measurement: Accelerating Improvement* (from the book series *Pathways to Quality Health Care*). Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2006. Available at www.nap.edu/catalog/11517.html.
- Aspen P, Wolcott J, Bootman JL, Cronenwett LR, eds. *Preventing Medication Errors: Quality Chasm Series*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2007. Available at www.nap.edu/catalog/11623.html.

Come and hear the latest news on patient and medication safety, network with your colleagues, and enjoy wine, cheese, and other light refreshments. The management of Majors Scientific Books has once again kindly allowed the chapter to host the member appreciation event at the store. Take advantage of this opportunity and browse the speaker-recommended books and the rest of Majors' collection of more than 50,000 medical books and resource guides.

The member appreciation event is free to anyone wishing to attend. However, so that those planning the meeting will know how much food and wine to buy, please register with

Anita Frijhoff by email (afrijhoff@amwasouthwest.org) or phone (512.323.5171) by Friday, March 16. Please include your full name and telephone number in the message. We hope to see you there!

Majors Scientific Books (www.majorsbooks.com) is located at 7205 Fannin between South Braeswood and Old Spanish Trail near the Texas Medical Center in Houston. There is parking on the premises. For those taking MetroRail, the bookstore is a few blocks south of the TMC Transit Center rail station.

2007 McGovern Award Presented to Pioneer in Medical Reporting on AIDS

On February 6, 2006, *USA Today* medical reporter Steve Sternberg received the 2007 John P. McGovern Award at the AMWA Southwest Chapter's annual banquet meeting in Houston. In a career spanning nearly three decades, Sternberg pioneered medical reporting on AIDS while covering the disease for various papers, including the *Miami Herald*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and *USA Today*.

Established in 1982 by AMWA Southwest, the McGovern Award annually recognizes excellence in the field of medical communications. The award is named for John P. McGovern, MD, founder and director of the McGovern Allergy Clinic in Houston and a noted educator, author, and historian. Dr. McGovern is a past member of AMWA Southwest and has been an AMWA Fellow since 1967.

Pamela Paradis Metoyer, ELS(D), McGovern Award Committee Chair, presented the award to Sternberg before 48 guests (29 members and 19 nonmembers), including past McGovern Award recipients Ruth SoRelle (1994) and Barbara Gastel, MD, MPH (2006). Sternberg then delivered his award lecture, in which he recounted "my journey as a journalist, how I got here and what it means—to me and to you—to cover a modern plague [AIDS]."

Roots of a Career

Sternberg began by exposing the roots of his career, the deepest of which was growing up with a brother mentally retarded by cerebral palsy: "I spent so much time...trying to explain mental retardation to other kids—I wanted them to realize how lucky they were to be properly wired and stop using the word *retard*—that I couldn't stop. I've simply expanded my range. I now explain every medical and public health issue you can imagine to the biggest audience I can find."

After equipping himself with a B.A. in English Literature from Ithaca College and an M.A. from the Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars' program in science writing, Sternberg first wrote for medical trade publications. Then, in 1981, at the urging of a journalist friend, he started interviewing for medical reporter positions in Miami, Atlanta, and New Orleans, all vibrant cities with thriving, competitive newspapers.

"I got a nibble at the *Atlanta Journal*," Sternberg recalled. "I got kicked down the escalators at the *Atlanta Constitution*, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune States-Item*, and the *Miami News*. At the *Miami Herald*, then one of the best newspapers in America, I ran into a

managing editor who said, 'Have you ever written about medicine? Our medical writer just quit to go to Yale Law School.' They decided to take a chance on me."

Eyes Wide Open

"I'm suddenly the lead medical reporter at one of the nation's top metro dailies. I have virtually no experience. AIDS has begun to spread," Sternberg said. "Even many of the experts believed that AIDS, which was then still unnamed, was a boutique disease of a handful of gays in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco."

"I could see in South Florida that they were wrong," Sternberg said. "If AIDS was a gay disease, how do you explain the fact that in South Florida, many of the patients were Haitian? If AIDS was a gay disease, how do you explain the case of the elderly Broward County man with hemophilia who had given the disease to his wife of something like 50 years?"

"This story, which appeared first in the *Miami Herald* under my byline, was the first recognized case of heterosexual AIDS in the United States. It went completely unnoticed for seven months, until [the *New York Times* ran a story] based on a case report about the couple in a medical journal."

Sternberg went on to describe the uncertainty and unease he and other journalists felt about reporting on a disease that no one really understood, whose origins and spread were fodder for farfetched or erroneous theories, and whose existence kindled heated competition among researchers to discover and publish its cause and rivalries fierce enough to incite occasional instances of laboratory sabotage.

"Nobody knew what was going on, how big or small [AIDS] would turn out to be," he said.

"No one had ever seen a communicable disease that could do to the immune system . . . what a bomb called 'Little Boy' did to Hiroshima."

"Amid all of the scientific wrangling, a global epidemic was unfolding. Although we couldn't see it at the time, the AIDS epidemic I was covering in Miami foreshadowed far better what AIDS would become today worldwide than what was happening in the privileged gay meccas of San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles. AIDS today is a disease of the poor, of the disenfranchised, of the dispossessed, hitting women harder than men and people of color harder than whites."

When AIDS Comes Home

In 1986, Sternberg left the *Miami Herald* to begin covering the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) full time for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. While working that beat, he began to follow the story of Tom Fox, a coworker in the paper's circulation department who also happened to be dying of AIDS.

After learning of Fox's condition, Sternberg recalls wondering how many other people he worked with might have the disease: "I was fresh from watching my grandfather die [and writing about it], and I wasn't ready to repeat the experience with someone else."

At a time when effective AIDS drugs were still years away, Sternberg followed Fox's daily struggle with AIDS and observed firsthand the AIDS culture in Atlanta, which encompassed everything from death-flaunting bacchanalian festivals to free Tuesday night dinners hosted at the city's Roman Catholic cathedral.

"Every day, I'd go into the newsroom and do my daily reporting job. It was like living in two worlds, each blind to the other," Sternberg said.

“To me, Tom was a human being, engaged in the fight of his life. To my editor, Tom was supposed to be a headline ready to run.”

The resulting story, “When AIDS Comes Home,” ran in its entirety after Fox’s death in 1989 and would ultimately win national awards and grudging praise from colleagues at Sternberg’s own paper.

This proved to be a pivotal point in Sternberg’s career: “Thinking back, it seems remarkable... that I didn’t stop to wonder what it must be like to have AIDS in a place like Africa, where you don’t have intensive care—or any care at all. That would be the next stage of my journey.”

Into Africa

In 1998, after several years as a freelance and shortly after joining *USA Today*, Sternberg received an invitation from Sandra Thurman, President Bill Clinton’s recently appointed AIDS czar, to accompany her on a AIDS fact-finding tour of Africa the next year. With his paper’s approval, Sternberg did.

“We were fed a bellyful of denial in the South African health minister’s office,” he said. “We visited an AIDS clinic in KwaZulu Natal, heartland of South Africa’s AIDS epidemic.”

“In Zambia, we sat facing the country’s president in the mansion,” Sternberg recalled. “Seated at the huge conference table with us were various other ministers. The president wondered what to do about all the AIDS orphans that seemed to be overrunning the streets. What indeed. There were 90,000 living two to a pothole or culvert, on the streets of Lusaka alone.”

“We visited a day school called Fountain of Hope, funded partly by the U.S. government, where youngsters could get a square meal and

learn to read and write. They also learned songs and dances, carefully choreographed, about a climactic battle against HIV, complete with imaginary guns.”

“It was this dance routine, in this place, that prompted [US] Ambassador Richard Holbrooke to convene the National Security Council to discuss the security implications of AIDS,” Sternberg recalled. “If these children, or the tens of thousands of orphans in other countries, were to end up with real guns [Holbrooke thought], Africa would be in even worse trouble than it is now.”

After Thurman’s fact-finding team returned to the United States, Sternberg remained behind, along with a photographer, for another two weeks to revisit some of his previous stops.

“When I returned from this trip, overwhelmed and exhausted, I discovered that the newspaper had undergone a reorganization,” Sternberg noted. “Suddenly, there was no place for my story in *USA Today*.”

“I faced the challenge of deciding how to write the story for a newspaper that puts a premium on entertainment, not tragic news. A travel story, I thought. A travel story would do. So I spent weeks crafting a story about a journey through the dark heartland of AIDS in Africa. After my story ran, President Clinton anted up \$100 million for AIDS programs overseas. It was a pittance, but it was a start.”

Sternberg then told of returning to South Africa the next year for the Durban AIDS Conference and eliciting from Nelson Mandela a thoughtful yet challenging and hopeful response to the question “How do you propose to free [South Africa] from the prison of AIDS?”

“My story [on Mandela’s response at Durban] never appeared in the newspaper,” Sternberg

said, “not because of any decision by my editors but because Mandela spoke on Friday and *USA Today* doesn’t publish on weekends. I wrote a piece for the web instead.”

Memory Boxes

Sternberg then commented on the static, even dwindling, coverage of AIDS in the mass media and proposed some possible ways to combat it.

“The fractured media marketplace, pitting newspapers and TV news programs against bloggers, podcasts, and the like, also has a major, and more insidious, influence,” Sternberg argued. “It exalts velocity, information gushing through a digital fire-hose.”

“As medical journalism moves forward, the challenge for all of us, especially you who are in a position to shape the future, will be to find new ways to balance speed with depth, numbers [on] heart-rates with beating hearts.”

Though acknowledging his own doubts about whether this challenge can be met, Sternberg closed by offering a story of “memory boxes” he had seen in Uganda.

“I spoke [there] to women with AIDS who had lost their husbands and many of their relatives,” he said. “Their children were likely to be orphaned in the next few years. These children, some of them very young, were facing the prospect of growing up without knowing...where they were born, who their parents were, where their relatives have gone, the stories of their family’s life.”

“To fill this gap for their children, many of these mothers have filled boxes or scrapbooks with narrative family histories, letters, snapshots, and drawings. These so-called memory boxes are documenting a journey through generations, packaging oral history with memorabilia, improvising the only legacy their children will ever have. Whatever route journalism takes, my hope is that the memory boxes we’ve created—of our culture and our history—will survive.”

After a short question-and-answer session, Sternberg finished his lecture to what he called his first standing ovation ever in such a setting.

—Jude Richard, ELS

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