

## TWELFTH NATHALIE BARR LECTURE

# The Power of the Written Word

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I cannot be with you today, but please know that at this very hour and moment my spirit is with you as my mentor and dear friend, Evelyn Mackin, says a few words on my behalf, and Judy Colditz, my special friend since my affiliation in 1974 with the Chapel Hill Hand Rehabilitation Center, reads this Nathalie Barr "note" to you.

I was extremely honored one year ago to receive this special award. I sincerely thank those who nominated me for it. I thank Terri Skirven and the Awards Committee for electing to bestow it on me, and all of you who honor me today with your presence.

I knew almost immediately after receiving the Nathalie Barr Award that I wanted to use the opportunity to speak to you about the written word in hand therapy. Our written words, be they in texts or journals, have the power to raise the universal level of practice, chart the course of our specialty, and be passed on the next generation of hand therapists. Unlike the spoken word, written words are accessible to all practitioners—within our specialty and in other disciplines. When backed by sound therapy, knowledge of other written works, and rigorous methods and analysis in research, written words have the power to teach; convince; stimulate new ideas, questions, and research; change how we practice; improve our collective treatment outcomes; and achieve better individual patient results. My greatest professional satisfaction has come from my involvement with the written word in hand rehabilitation—most especially because it has given me the opportunity to work with and learn from so many of the master clinicians among

us. My greatest respect is for those who have labored to share their knowledge, especially the fruits of their disciplined research, with their peers through written words.

After I was appointed Incoming Editor of the *Journal of Hand Therapy*, I knew I wanted to focus my talk on the power of the written word in our Journal. In preparation for this talk and for my term as Editor, I reviewed in depth the first ten years of our Journal to get a better sense of the strengths and weakness of our written words, particularly in our research studies. I have much to share with you as a result of that study, especially thoughts on how each one of us, as research consumers, can draw more power from the research studies in our Journal. There are things that all of us, whether sophisticated or not in research design and statistics, should look for in any research study, in order to determine whether the results of the study are clinically, not just statistically, important. I had planned to share these "Reader Guidelines" with you today and present examples from our Journal, but that sharing now must be deferred to another time.

On Friday, August 1, 1997, I experienced the power of the written word in science in a most profound way. As I sat working on my Nathalie Barr Lecture, my husband, a pathologist, came home at midday from the hospital and, with tears in his eyes and a breaking voice, told me that my previous day's breast biopsy was positive for invasive ductal carcinoma. Three hours later, we sat together across from an oncologist. In a kind and caring way, the oncologist gave us a systematic overview of breast cancer treatment algorithms. He shared research data on the effects of treatment by surgical excision alone, by surgery with chemotherapy and radiation, and by surgery with chemotherapy, radiation, and hormone treatment. He told us what effect positive lymph nodes and other diagnostic information would have on treatment pathways and expected outcome. He explained how and why survival statistics have changed in the last two de-

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cares, and how chemotherapy has changed in the last five to eight years. I listened in a state of shock. I knew I would make decisions based on his information that would affect my treatment outcome and my life span. But on that day I could not integrate the information he presented.

It was not until a few days later that I began to wonder. I wondered about the researchers, the source of my oncologist's information. How sound was their data? Were the studies randomized and controlled, or were they descriptive case series? Were they large studies or small? Were they carried out in a rigorous way? Had they been reported with the utmost integrity? Had they been replicated at other centers? How long and thorough was the follow-up?

I wondered about the peer review process that resulted in acceptance of these studies for publication. Had the review process been carried out with the utmost integrity? Did the reviewers have solid clinical experience and a sound background in research design? Were the review standards uniform and high among reviewers and across publications? Was there any bias or compromise in the review process?

Finally, I wondered about the next link in the research process—the reader, my oncologist. He is the final peer reviewer of the research studies that would affect decisions in my treatment. He is the person in whom I am placing my trust. Had he read these studies carefully and critically? Did he read between the lines in such a way that he could identify soft data? Would he be able to consider my particular profile of diagnostic information against the backdrop of these group studies, so he could recommend the most effective treatment for me as an individual?

These same questions about researcher, reviewer, and reader apply equally to our hand therapy literature. Our studies do not deal with life-and-death issues, but they certainly concern quality-of-life issues. When our patients put their hands in ours for treatment, they are also placing their faith and confidence in our research processes, in our peer review processes, and in our critical reading of the studies that influence our treatment recommendations. It is our professional responsi-

bility to see that their faith and confidence is not misplaced. Those of us who never engage in research or sit on a journal's editorial board still have a professional obligation to read skeptically, critically, and with an open mind before taking what we read back to the clinic. Hippocrates stressed the reader's responsibility when he noted, "The power, too, to study correctly what has been written I consider to be an important part of the art of medicine" (Epidemics III.XVI). We have the resources within our Society and through our Journal to raise the level of our critical reading so that we can all draw more power from the written word in hand therapy. I hope we will make use of them.

To have been selected as the 1997 Nathalie Barr Lecturer and as Incoming Editor of our Journal within the same year was, for me, a double honor of the highest degree. To be Editor in the manner I envisioned would require many more hours a week than I anticipate being able to give in the foreseeable future. Therefore, I have encouraged our President, Terri Wolfe, and the ASHT Board to select another editor. Evelyn Mackin has brought the Journal from infancy to adolescence, and by having it accepted into *Index Medicus* has put it on the same playing field as the most prestigious journals published today. The new editor will have the honor and responsibility of guiding our Journal through adolescence toward maturity. I wish that person well.

Since August 1, I have experienced the power of the written word in another very personal way. I have received many written words of encouragement, support, inspiration, friendship, and love from so many of you, my friends, in the American Society of Hand Therapists. These, along with your telephone calls, offers of help, referrals to friends who have survived breast cancer, prayers, dozens of flowers, gifts, and the Mackin Hand Club "meals on wheels," have lifted me more than you can imagine and more than I can ever hope to express. Your names are engraved in my heart. Your loving words and gifts will accompany me and provide light as I travel through the tunnel of the next several months. I am indeed with you in spirit today. I look forward to seeing you in New Orleans next year, and send you my heartfelt thanks and love.