Pandora’s Boxes: Questions Unleashed in Airport Scanner Debate

To the Editor:

Like the chaos unleashed by the mythical Pandora’s box, the decision of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) to begin installing advanced imaging technology in airports has led to the public being bombarded by conflicting information about the new “full-body scanners.” The two types of scanning technology being implemented are, primarily, “backscatter” models, which use low levels of ionizing radiation, and, less commonly, “millimeter wave” models, which use radio frequencies from 30 GHz to 300 GHz.

The ionizing radiation of backscatter models is potentially carcinogenic to human tissues, and radiation doses are cumulative to tissues that are repeatedly exposed. The radio frequencies of millimeter wave models are not currently considered to be inherently carcinogenic. However, there is much more information available about backscatter systems, which were introduced in 1992, than about the newer millimeter wave systems, which are still not widely used in airports.

The debate over these scanning technologies in the news media has centered primarily on traveler privacy issues related to the images produced. The debate has focused only secondarily on the safety of the traveling public exposed to such scans and on the effectiveness of these technologies in detection. We believe that issues of traveler privacy and machine effectiveness are best discussed in other venues. In the present letter, we address concerns related to the safety of scanner radiation. Because the Department of Homeland Security views the body scanner issue to be a sensitive matter of national security, we anticipate that there is some information concerning these technologies that is not available to us.

From the available literature that we reviewed, we found that radiation dosing from a single backscatter scan is reported as ranging from 0.005 mrem to 0.009 mrem. By comparison, a passenger on a cross-country flight receives approximately 3 mrem of radiation, and the dose from a single chest radiograph is 10 mrem. Backscatter systems have not proven to be harmful, according to several authorities, including the TSA, the US Food and Drug Administration’s Center for Devices and Radiological Health, the National Institute of Standards and Technology, The Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, the Center for Radiological Research at Columbia University, the United Kingdom’s Health Protection Agency, and the American College of Radiology. The American College of Radiology has reported that “a traveler would require more than 1,000 backscatter scans in a year to reach the effective dose equal to one standard chest x-ray.”

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There are 3 backscatter models that are currently manufactured for security screening. American Science and Engineering Inc of Billerica, Massachusetts, produces the SmartCheck\textsuperscript{10}; Rapiscan Systems of the United Kingdom produces the Secure 1000\textsuperscript{11}; and Tek84 Engineering Group of San Diego, California, produces the Ait84.\textsuperscript{12} Of these devices, Rapiscan Systems’ Secure 1000 is the most commonly used. In an interview published in the Los Angeles Times in November 2010, Peter Kant, Rapiscan Systems’ executive vice president of global government affairs, stated that his company produced 211 of the 385 image scanners then in use at the 68 airports in which such machines had been deployed.\textsuperscript{13} (According to the TSA Web site, there were 486 image scanners at 78 airports as of January 2011.)\textsuperscript{14} Based on the previously cited report by the National Institute of Standards and Technology,\textsuperscript{5} it appears that Rapiscan Systems’ Secure 1000 has been designed with appropriate safeguards for widespread deployment.

Despite the published reports that support the safety of backscatter technology,\textsuperscript{5-9} scientists at the University of California, San Francisco\textsuperscript{15} have recently raised questions about how radiation exposures were calculated in the reports—raising doubts about the accuracy of the dose-per-scan data.\textsuperscript{3,4} These scientists have also raised questions regarding whether backscatter scanning would pose an added health risk for individuals who are genetically susceptible to particular cancers.\textsuperscript{15} These safety issues certainly require further research. Moreover, we have been unable to find any reports of backscatter technologies being subjected to large-scale clinical outcomes studies or other medical testing with either human or animal subjects.

As we previously noted, questions regarding the effectiveness of scanner technologies are best left to other venues. Nevertheless, all medical decisions involve considerations of risks vs benefits. If a procedure carries a potential risk (such as radiation exposure) and if the procedure’s benefits are in question, such facts would be important to know in making medical decisions, including the decision on whether an individual agrees to be scanned.

In April 2010, The Vancouver Sun published a revealing interview with Rafi Sela, former chief security officer at the Israel Airport Authority and a 30-year veteran in airport security and defense technology who helped design security measures at Ben Gurion International Airport in Tel Aviv.\textsuperscript{16} Mr Sela was quoted as saying, “I don’t know why everybody is running to buy these expensive and useless [full-body scanner] machines. I can overcome the body scanners with enough explosives to bring down a Boeing 747. ... That’s why we haven’t put them in our airport.”\textsuperscript{16}

In regard to millimeter wave technology, Ben Wallace, a member of the British Parliament who worked on millimeter wave scanners for the defense research organization QinetiQ, was quoted in a January 2010 Mail Online article as saying, “The millimeter wave technology is harmless, quick and can be deployed overtly or covertly. But it cannot detect chemicals or light plastics.”\textsuperscript{17} This limitation could prove to be a serious obstacle in the widespread adoption of millimeter wave technology in airport security.

Of course, the adoption by terrorists of alternative strategies designed to bypass both backscatter and millimeter wave machines—such as body-packing—could render both types of scanners irrelevant. Although concerns about the effectiveness of these devices may one day make the issue of safety mute, such questions persist today.

In summary, it is our sense that—given the current state of scientific knowledge—backscatter radiation scans may be safe, with appropriate built-in safeguards to allow these machines to be deployed for everyday use by appropriately trained personnel. However, large-scale clinical testing of these devices has not yet been performed, and there are legitimate questions concerning the effectiveness of these machines in accomplishing the task for which they were designed. Therefore, using the logic of the risk-benefit ratio, it might be prudent to obtain more information on clinical exposure and more confirmation of device effectiveness before exposing large segments of the population to these full-body scanners.

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References

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New COMLEX-USA-to-USMLE Conversion Formula Needed

To the Editor:
I read with interest the letter to the editor by John R. Gimple, DO, MEd,1 published in the October 2010 issue of JAOA—The Journal of the American Osteopathic Association, regarding the formula proposed by Philip C. Slocum, DO, and Janet S. Louder,2 for converting Comprehensive Osteopathic Medical Licensing Examination-USA (COMLEX-USA) scores to United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) scores for use by Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) residency program directors. Dr. Gimple3 noted that he welcomed suggestions regarding this matter. My suggestion is to allow the USMLE to be used as the competency examination for graduates of colleges of osteopathic medicine (COMs), with an adjunct test required to cover the theory and methods of osteopathic medicine, which are not included in the USMLE. In the interest of full disclosure, I acknowledge that I have not taken either examination yet, as I am currently a second-year osteopathic medical student. However, I do plan on taking the USMLE in addition to the COMLEX-USA.

In the medical education article by Dr. Slocum and Ms. Louder,2 concern was expressed regarding how much of a COM student’s score is affected by material unique to the COMLEX-USA, such as questions about osteopathic manipulative treatment (OMT). My suggestion of allowing students’ knowledge of science and standard medical practice to be assessed using the USMLE and students’ knowledge of OMT to be assessed using an adjunct test would allow residents to understand that OMT is more than manipulation and patient interaction.

I suspect that Dr. Gimple1 and the National Board of Osteopathic Medical Examiners may be resistant to this idea. However, my suggestion is more directed toward the American Osteopathic Association and the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine, to urge them to consider allowing osteopathic medical students to use the USMLE with an adjunct test to obtain certification and advance through osteopathic medical school.

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References

Response
Student Doctor Burmeister suggests that the American Osteopathic Association (AOA) and the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine (AACOM) allow osteopathic medical students to take the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE). In fact, the AOA and AACOM do allow students to take the USMLE; they just do not allow students to substitute the USMLE for the Comprehensive Osteopathic Medical Licensing Examination-USA.

Tangentially, Student Doctor Burmeister struck a chord regarding a basic flaw in osteopathic medical education. We in osteopathic medical education tend to treat osteopathic manipulative medicine (OMM) as an “add on” to the practice of osteopathic medicine. Indeed, many advocates of OMM treat it as a subspecialty, further isolating OMM from mainstream osteopathic medicine. We fail to get the faculty, staff, and students at colleges of osteopathic medicine (COMs) to understand that OMM is more than manipulation and that it should be integrated into every patient interaction.

Few lectures in medicine, surgery, or any other topic at COMs truly integrate osteopathic principles—except to take standard medical principles and stamp the “osteopathic seal of approval” on them. Even when lectures include osteopathic concepts, these concepts are too often introduced for only a few minutes at the end of a standard medical lecture just to tie OMM into the discus-
sion. Until we solve this basic problem to the satisfaction of most members of our profession, we will continue to hear comments similar to those of Student Doctor Burmeister. In fact, those of us who are old enough remember making similar comments ourselves some 40 years ago.

Student Doctor Burmeister should be congratulated and thanked for his willingness to share his views. We should take heed and learn what osteopathic medical students, residents, and young osteopathic physicians—who are our future—want and need in their education and training. All proper tools must be provided to the young members of our profession to allow them to not only have great careers in medicine but, more to the point, to have outstanding careers as leaders in the fastest growing segment of the medical world—osteopathic medicine.

Philip C. Slocum, DO
Professor of Medicine, Dean, Kirksville College of Osteopathic Medicine-A.T. Still University of Health Sciences, Missouri

Response

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the letter to the editor by Student Doctor Burmeister regarding the Comprehensive Osteopathic Medical Licensing Examination (COMLEX-USA).

As was stated in my original letter ([Am Osteopath Assoc. 2010;110(10):577-578], the National Board of Osteopathic Medical Examiners’ COMLEX-USA series assesses the competencies essential for the practice of osteopathic medicine. Osteopathic medical students and residents train for the practice of osteopathic medicine, and the curriculum of every osteopathic medical school and residency program incorporates distinctive osteopathic principles that prepare DOs for this practice. Only the COMLEX-USA series assesses the skills and philosophy unique to the osteopathic medical profession and to the practice of osteopathic medicine. This distinctive examination construct with its integration of osteopathic principles and practice is essential, and this material cannot be covered merely as an adjunct to the United States Medical Licensing Examination, as Student Doctor Burmeister suggests.

The osteopathic medical profession honors its contract with the public by ensuring that osteopathic physicians are licensed based on the COMLEX-USA, which is designed specifically for the practice of osteopathic medicine and validated for that distinct purpose.

John R. Gimpel, DO, MEd
President and Chief Executive Officer, National Board of Osteopathic Medical Examiners

How to Avoid a Heart Attack: Putting it all Together

“Poison is in everything, and no thing is without poison.
The dosage makes it either a poison or a remedy.”
—Philipus Aureolus Paracelsus

“If you don’t read the newspaper, you’re uninformed.
If you do read the newspaper, you’re misinformed.”
—Mark Twain

To the Editor:
We thank Dr Haffey for his response[1] to our critique[2] of his clinical review article, “How to Avoid a Heart Attack: Putting It All Together,” [3] which appeared in the May 2009 supplement to JA O A—The Journal of the American Osteopathic Association. Unfortunately, Dr Haffey[1] did not address any of the specific points that we made in our letter.2 Dosage, the actual substances used, how far along on the age-related continuum we can expect to see reversibility, and the confluence of multiple nutritional factors—each of which may be necessary but not sufficient alone—are all relevant to cardiovascular outcome studies and the specific points that we raised.

Omega-3 fatty acids in the diet have shown considerable power to favorably affect vascular and cardiac outcomes in elderly men with or without high risk for cardiovascular disease (CVD).[4,6] However, large doses of omega-3 fatty acids for short periods may produce adverse results.[7] Of course, there is no shortage of studies in which the use of insignificant amounts of omega-3 fatty acids (eg, 200 mg daily of eicosapentaenoic acid, 500 mg daily of docosahexaenoic acid) led to statistically nonsignificant results.[8] A literature review yielded a study from Japan (where fish intake is much higher than in most other countries) in which further supplementation with 1800 mg daily of eicosapentaenoic acid produced a statistically significant reduction in the number of cardiac events in patients with hypercholesterolemia who were using statins over just a 5-year period.[9]

Vitamin Supplementation

A recent study showed that vitamin D, in large annual doses, produced adverse effects that countered the beneficial effects it produced at lower doses.[10] In another recent study, researchers at Boston University Medical Center completed a randomized, blinded controlled clinical trial of vitamin D₃ supplementation involving 49 normotensive black youth. The investigators found that 2000 IU daily of vitamin D₃ decreased carotid-femoral pulse wave velocity (a measure of arterial stiffness), compared to an increase in carotid-femoral pulse wave velocity in the control group (400 IU daily vitamin D₃).[11] Furthermore, evidence from a prospective study of 41,504 individuals indicates that vitamin D deficiency may be associated with prevalent and incident CVD risk factors.[12]

The broad category of CVD has at least 3 age-related common pathways: oxidation, inflammation, and glycation. For the oxidation pathway, the use of antioxidants intuitively makes sense. Although antioxidant supplementation has been shown to reduce oxidative stress and inflammation,[13] should we really expect antioxidants to reverse cellular DNA damage in patients with coronary artery disease?[14]
The Third National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES III), covering 1988 to 1994, revealed that 13% of the population in the United States was vitamin C deficient (<11.4 μmol/L), and the 2003-2004 NHANES revealed a prevalence of vitamin C deficiency of 7.1%. Low levels of plasma vitamin C have been associated with progression of atherosclerosis, increased risk of acute myocardial infarction in women, higher levels of low-density lipoprotein cholesterol and triglycerides in a meta-analysis of 13 randomized controlled trials, and a higher rate of stroke among middle-aged men with hypertension. It may seem amazing that vitamin C would dissociate the risk of stroke from the precondition of hypertension. Yet, when one reviews the vitamin C–dependent enzymatic reactions involving connective tissue repair—including blood vessels—this dissociation is not surprising at all.

For water-soluble vitamin C, addition of 500 mg daily to the dietary intake of middle-aged to elderly Americans is probably not enough to produce statistically significant results. Most studies showing benefits of vitamin C have used at least 700 mg daily. However, the bottom of the optimal range may increase with age and may be closer to Linus Pauling’s estimate (ie, 2-10 g daily), which was based on the amount of vitamin C necessary to replicate the serum levels of animals that make their own vitamin C. The Linus Pauling Institute recommends vitamin C intake in the range of 200 to 400 mg daily.

Direct arterial infarction of just 1 g of ascorbic acid has been found to improve arterial elasticity immediately in individuals who smoke cigarettes. Single nucleotide polymorphisms that code for L-ascorbic acid cotransporter-1 may impair the access and utilization of vitamin C in a minority of patients.

Pocobelli et al evaluated data from 77,673 men and women, aged 50 to 76 years, who participated in the Vitamins and Lifestyle Study. Questionnaires collected from these participants between 2000 and 2002 provided information on their supplement use over the previous 10 years, and the cohort was followed for 5 years. During the follow-up period, 3577 deaths occurred. Participants whose vitamin C supplementation averaged at least 322 mg daily during the 10-year period had an 11% lower risk of dying during the 5-year follow-up period than did participants who did not use vitamin C. When Pocobelli et al examined participant mortality by cause, multivitamin use of 6 to 7 days per week was associated with a 16% lower risk of death from CVD, and vitamin E use of more than 215 mg daily was associated with a 28% lower risk of death from CVD. Although this was “only” an epidemiologic study, the large numbers of participants and the extended length of time allowed for small differences to manifest.

As reported in 2010, a prospective population-based study, begun in 1994 in the United Kingdom, evaluated plasma levels and oral intake of vitamin C during a 13-year period in 1054 participants older than 65 years in the British National Diet and Nutrition Survey. By September 2008, 74% of the men and 62% of the women had died. The study results showed that increased plasma levels of vitamin C and increased dietary intake of vitamin C were both significantly associated with a reduction in all-cause mortality among participants. The results also revealed that increased dietary intake of vitamins C and E conferred a statistically significant protective effect against cancer.

Another recent prospective population-based study, conducted at the Karolinska Institute in Sweden, examined multivitamin use in 31,671 women with no histories of CVD and 2262 women with histories of CVD between the ages of 49 and 83 years. Use of multivitamins was found to be associated with reduced risk of myocardial infarction—with a multivariable-adjusted hazard ratio of 0.73. In addition, use of multivitamins for at least 5 years was found to be associated with a hazard ratio of 0.59 among women who were initially free from CVD. The authors concluded, “The use of multivitamins was inversely associated with [myocardial infarction], especially long-term use among women with no CVD.”

For fat-soluble vitamin E, the use of dl α-tocopherol is clearly inferior to the natural mixture of α-tocopherols, γ-tocopherols, and tocotrienols, because dl α-tocopherol competitively inhibits at least the γ-tocopherols.

The B vitamins may be sufficient to reduce homocysteine levels, but is a homocysteine level of 11 μmol/L really low enough to produce a beneficial effect on endothelial inflammation or already-present atherosclerosis?

As many as 1 in 10 individuals have a defective thermolabile variant of 5,10-methylenetetrahydrofolate reductase that is associated with mild hyperhomocysteinemia, vascular disease, and neural tube birth defects. These individuals may require 5-methyltetrahydrofolate (5-10 mg daily) or large doses of trimethylglycine or betaine to reduce homocysteine levels to the range of 7 to 8 μmol/L. Folic acid used as part of primary prevention has been shown to reduce the risk of stroke in patients.

Considering the obesity and diabetes mellitus epidemic of the previous 15 years, a rising incidence of glycation is another probable confounding factor. In the management of prediabetes with metformin, it is probably wise to check patients for vitamin B12 deficiency on a yearly basis.

Pharmaceutical Industry Bias

Crucial to the question of what studies we are to accept as valid is the issue of bias, including bias in the context of the US medical system and specialty bias that might contribute to Dr Haffey’s certainty that no published evidence exists to support the use of vitamin supplements to improve cardiovascular health. Considering the existence of such bias, are we really being paranoid in picking apart the evidentiary studies discussed by Dr Haffey and in finding fre-
Bias for Interventional Procedures

Now we turn to a more tacit institutional and specialty bias that exists in the US medical system in favor of interventional procedure-oriented medicine and against primary prevention. Let us consider the radiology department. As early as 1970, John Gofman, MD, PhD, expressed concern in The Lancet that the amount of radiation capable of doubling the risk of breast cancer is very low. In 2002, the Life Extension Foundation warned of the dangers of computed tomography (CT) and electron-beam radiation, noting that “a chest CT is equivalent to 400 chest x-rays, or 3.6 years of background radiation.”

In 2007, Fred Mettler, MD, reported at the annual meeting of the National Council on Radiation Protection and Measurements that patients’ radiation exposure had increased more than 750% in the previous 25 years. The use of CT scanning in the United States increased at least 10% per year during that 25-year period, climbing from 3 million scans in 1980 to 60 million scans in 2005. Dr Mettler was quoted as saying, “I don’t think radiologists have a clue about how much this has grown.”

In 1995, the American Journal of Roentgenology, reflecting a different bias, reported that lower doses of radiation were sufficient for good CT image quality. In 2001, editorialists in the same journal criticized the excessive use of radiation and asserted that “radiologists have been unaware or indifferent to the high dose of radiation dosage with CT scans.”

The American College of Radiology acknowledged in 2007 that the expanded use of medical imaging would result in an increase in cancer cases, although the organization could not quantify this increase. However, a study by the National Cancer Institute reported that CT scanning performed during 2007 alone would eventually cause 29,000 new cases of cancer and 15,000 deaths. An article published in JAMA in 2007 estimated the lifetime increased risk of cancer from a single 64-slice CT coronary angiogram as 1 in 466 for a 60-year-old woman.

Radiation from annual full-body CT screening examinations between ages 45 and 75 years has been estimated to result in a lifetime incidence of radiation-induced fatal cancer in 1 of 50 screened individuals. This latter estimate assumes no additional lifetime radiation exposures.

So, do the biases of physicists, radiologists, and the owners of full-body or cardiac calcium-score CT scanners align together in a uniform science-based perspective dedicated to the pursuit of truth—or do their recommendations and conclusions tend to reflect their individual biases?

It is curious that Linus Pauling’s shadow should cross this discussion of willful nonengagement regarding the dangers of CT radiation, because Pauling’s second Nobel Prize, for peace, was related to his research on the health effects of radiation from atmospheric atomic bomb testing in the 1950s.

Remember Occam’s Razor

The medical profession today is drowning in data. A necessary survival technique is to preselect the sources of one’s information, beginning with attention to the biases of any source. A medical journal will have its own biases, as will each author, specialty, research institution, and funding corporation. Adapting the rule of Occam’s razor, the simplest guide is to follow the economic interests of the various parties. If all these biases line up, more or less, along one vector, you are then in a better position to evaluate the usefulness of the reported
“facts” and data.

To evaluate a particular journal article, we should look at the provenance of the article (indicative of its inherent biases and eventual economic impact), the coherency of the scientific method, the biological plausibility of reported results, and the practical usefulness of the results. We all have biases—they are essential parts of who we are. The economic biases of institutions, journals, and authors tend to be stable over time. Thus, conducting a “pre-triage” of reading material is not as daunting as it may seem.

We will leave it to Dr Haffey1,3 to assess bias in the vascular/cardiology journals, which are more familiar terrain to him than to us. We would expect that he would find a bias for the economic interests of cardiologists, with a preference for interventional procedures over primary prevention.

Meeting the Challenge

The present letter has focused on primary prevention studies. We plan to present evidence on vitamin/nutritional interventions for secondary CVD prevention in a subsequent letter.

Dr Haffey’s challenge1 to produce studies of sufficient size and clarity to demonstrate the benefits of antioxidant orthomolecular treatment on primary prevention of CVD is a fair one. Part of this challenge is not to spend vast amounts of time and money to produce studies that fail to confirm the biological plausibility of a long tail of epidemiologic studies, prospective cohort studies, and small double-blind studies. Prospective, randomized open trials with blinded endpoint assessment may be the most efficacious type of study for the next decade. Counterintuitive findings in studies must meet and pass higher levels of scrutiny to overcome perceived levels of economic or specialty bias.

The obvious public health problems of cigarette smoking, obesity, and lack of exercise remain to be solved on a societal level. The reduction of trans fatty acids in the food chain is one recent success. It will take time, thought, and considerable amounts of money to meet Dr Haffey’s challenge.1 We hope that will come to pass during our lifetimes.

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References

LETTERS


Dr Haffey was shown this letter and declined to comment.

Communication by Degrees

To the Editor:

There has been considerable discussion recently of the advisability of changing the DO degree. Good-willed, well-intentioned DOs have strongly suggested a change, and equally well-meaning and competent osteopathic physicians have opposed it. Admittedly, there are a few—very few, I believe—MD-wannabes, and any discussion of degree modification would not satisfy this extreme group; I am not addressing that here.

I would like to explore this topic as a communication problem, a different perspective than usually offered.

But what is a degree anyhow? It is the academic title conferred after completion of a prescribed course of study. But it does not tell anything about the quality of the learner’s work. Mostly, we are dealing with the abbreviation of the academic degree: initials that communicate instantly the professional field of the bearers and the actual academic degree and license (eg, PharmD, doctor of pharmacy; DPM, doctor of podiatric medicine). It is a strong communication tool.

What connotation that degree communicates is another story. Much depends on the background and experiences of the reader or listener. So, in the long run, we are really concerned about connotation of the abbreviation. Does changing a degree change its connotation?

Historically, we changed our degree some years ago from doctor of osteopathy to doctor of osteopathic medicine, but maintained DO as its abbreviation. The disagreement is really about the abbreviation.

Let’s look at the arguments. One of the ubiquitous premises is that several professions changed their degrees...
without difficulty. But is that analogous to the osteopathic situation? No, it is not. All the degree changes were within the same professional group, and with almost unanimous agreement of its practitioners.

Lawyers, for example, had been using (sparingly) their actual academic degree, LLB, or the commoner nondegree, Esquire. In order to eliminate these unacceptable designations, establish uniformity, and eliminate any confusion, the legal profession adopted the juris doctor (JD) for all attorneys, allowing every lawyer, both in practice and those to follow, to use that degree. It was within the same profession.

Pharmacists did not really change their degree—they upgraded their professional classification. It was realized that the profession of pharmacy was taking on a new and wider role in clinical specialization and dealing with patients clinically more and more. They were becoming involved with patient counseling, compliance, and education. On the basis that this increased emphasis met the standards for a doctorate, from about 1994 forth, all colleges of pharmacy conferred the PharmD degree—and holders of the BS in Pharmacy were not entitled to use the PharmD designation. A different situation.

Similar descriptions apply to the other professions that have been mentioned as changing their degrees.

However, in the healing arts, there are 2 professions: Allopathic Medicine and Osteopathic Medicine. Both are recognized by each other, by all government agencies, and by almost all of the population. These are 2 separate (not as much as previously), rather distinct, almost parallel, and in some aspects “competitive” professions offering complete healthcare to the public. Most practitioners in each group want the public to be able to recognize what they are instantly—by means of a degree. Would changing the degree alter the public’s conception of what each is or does? Hardly. It would not alter what I, and many others, have experienced after osteopathic medicine began to gain a foothold: Hearing of Dr So-and-so, the puzzled answer (an actuality) was, “Who? Oh, you mean the osteopath!” No change of degree would change ignorant or prejudiced mind-sets.

What it would do is create a new problem—explaining to believers and non-believers alike what the new ABC is (I use that to avoid endorsing any degree change and to increase recognition of the problem). What is an ABC? Is it the same as the DO? Or is it the same as an MD? Or is it something new? We would have to explain carefully this change to all our patients (with patience)—taking a lot of valuable time. It will not be “Oh, my doctor is now an ABC—that’s great!” And we would not be able reach all those out there we do not reach now.

But it would create more questions, more doubts, and more controversy among the rest of the world. We’ve already arrived—why stir things up?

Let’s look at the 1 time our profession changed its degree. When California offered DOs an MD degree for $65, those who accepted became MDs. At last! But just to make sure, the California Medical Association did not integrate them into the medical society, but instead isolated (try Ghetto-ized) them into a single “District” society that was statewide and contained all, and only, former DOs—thereby limiting their possible influence in any important matters. It was no longer, “Oh, those DOs,” it was “Oh, that’s just District X talking.” What did we gain except loss of identity?

Connotations, assumptions, and lack of knowledge would not be changed by the communication of a new degree. Only new problems would be included, including possible snide offerings of any of our “enemies.” So, it serves no real communication purpose.

A homely analogy: zebras, seeing the greater popularity and acceptance of horses and the many ways they resembled horses, might opt to change their names to “horses.” They would still be zebras but would continue calling themselves “horses.” Those people who knew what a horse was and what a zebra was would be totally confused. Those who didn’t know what a horse was and what a zebra was really wouldn’t care.

Allow me a purely personal commentary. For the past 65 years I have carried the DO degree, while the profession went from isolation, prejudice, discrimination, exclusion, and lack of recognition and acceptance to today’s position of widespread acceptance and recognition in so many quarters (allopathic hospitals, MD medical schools, the US Armed Forces, almost every health department, all government agencies and, to a much greater extent than before, even the public). All this on the DO degree. For myself, I would not trade my DO degree—even for an MD degree—for anything. There will always be unbelievers and skeptics. Better to build on the great progress that has been made over the past 50-plus years.

FOREVER, I want to be able to sign my name, as I always have, with so much recognition, acceptance, and success—

Arnold Melnick, DO
Aventura, Florida