

Psychology loses its MVP on national health care team

By Paula E. Hartman-Stein, Ph.D.

Psychology has lost a tireless advocate and warrior who fought for decades behind the scenes for fair reimbursement under Medicare. At 69, James Georgoulakis, Ph.D., passed away Aug. 26 after a three-year battle with cancer. He was laid to rest with full military honors in San Antonio.

As my friend and colleague for 25 years I had first-hand knowledge of Jim's impact on clinical practice through the arduous work he did quietly and without fanfare. I write this tribute to honor his memory and to inform psychologists how much they benefit from his work.

Antonio Puente, Ph.D., president of the American Psychological Association (APA), who worked closely with Jim on national health care committees, called him "the unsung hero of professional psychology."

Jim and I first worked together in 1992 on an APA committee formed by a team of Harvard economists who had the government-imposed task of determining the financial value of the "work" of psychological services. Jim was the representative from the Department of Defense.

Not only a highly competent professional, Jim was also trustworthy and warm, traits that enabled him to gain respect of all who knew him. He successfully negotiated for psychology for approximately 20 years as the APA representative to the adversarial forum, the Relative Update Committee (RUC) of the American Medical Association. The RUC makes financial recommendations to CMS for all services under Medicare.

Jim also served for three years with the Research Subcommittee of the RUC, the only non-MD of the group to assure that procedure code surveys are done appropriately.

In a 2012 interview Jim said this about the RUC, "It is very difficult to keep in mind that it is not personal while individuals pummel you unmercifully, criticizing your data hour after hour. The RUC process is brutal."

Through hours of preparation, a sense of humor and the ability to remain calm under pressure, Jim was able to skillfully handle the heated exchanges with the medical subspecialists whose payments for services would be reduced if mental health services received an increase.

I had countless interviews and informal conversations with Jim. He reviewed 60 of my patient records, taught me proper documentation from Medicare's perspective, triggers for audits and why every practice must have a compliance plan. Through my columns in *The National Psychologist* I became his voice to the practitioner.

Jim and Tony Puente worked in conjunction for nearly a decade, negotiating with the AMA powerbrokers to push psychology into the mainstream of health care by developing the health and behavior codes.

I greatly admired Jim, the consummate athlete, scholar and warrior. He obtained a B.S. in Education from the University of Alabama where he played football and was co-captain of the track team. He was the National AAU decathlon champion during his college years and placed fifth in the U.S. Olympic trials in the decathlon. He had been in training for the Senior Olympics in 2014 prior to his cancer diagnosis.

Jim earned an M.S.W. from the University of Alabama, a degree in counseling from Western Kentucky University, a Ph.D. in counseling psychology from Kansas State University, an M.B.A. from Our Lady of the Lake University and a Juris Doctorate degree in law with a concentration in health law. He also completed a post-doctoral program in research and multivariate statistics.

For over 20 years he served in active duty in the U.S. Army. In college he was a member of the Army ROTC counter-guerillas designed to prepare him for the special forces. His military decorations include the Legion of Merit with Oak Leaf Cluster and the Order of Military Medical Merit. His most recent position was clinical professor in the Army Master of Social Work Program, U.S. Army Academy of Health Sciences at Fort Sam Houston.

Georgoulakis' research and policy interests spanned a wide range of topics, including the impact of torture on prisoners, burnout in military officers, the incidence of mental health disorders in the military, evaluation and design of prospective payment systems for mental health in the United States and Canada and federal compliance policies.

A prolific writer, Jim published over 70 articles or book chapters. Particularly timely today, he wrote a chapter in 1998 about the single payer system entitled, "Integrating mental and physical health services: What the U.S. can learn from Canada" published in my edited book, *Innovative Behavioral Healthcare for Older Adults*.

In an interview about the future of reimbursement rates, Jim said, "Lobbying legislators has a place, but where we make great impact is at the RUC. We have to be in tune with and be a partner with the AMA, the big elephant in the room. We're better off to ride him than be trampled by him."

Randy Phelps, Ph.D., from APA has taken over Jim's former position at the RUC.

Among his many academic recognitions, Georgoulakis was a Fellow of the APA and received the Karl F. Heiser Presidential Award, the National Academy of Neuropsychology Presidential award, and the Webster University William T. Kemper Excellence in Teaching Award.

Jim was also dedicated to his family – his wife Melissa, son Steven, daughter Mary Beth, stepson Shane and three grandchildren. He was a lifelong member of St. Sophia Greek Orthodox Church in San Antonio and had served on its board.

In recognition of his professional impact, Sara Hon Qualls, Ph.D., professor at the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs, said, “Jim Georgoulakis brought a plethora of skills and perspectives to our field that changed the way we work. He called us to pay attention to our quality improvement and quality assurance processes. Perhaps most importantly, he was generous with his time and expertise, sharing it with good humor and patience.”

According to Donna Rasin-Waters, Ph.D., of the San Francisco VA office, “Jim was the consummate colleague: intelligent, generous, kind-hearted and ethical. In the field of practicing psychology, Jim is irreplaceable and will be sorely missed.”

Joe Casciani, Ph.D., of San Diego, said, “Jim’s death is a tough loss for our profession, but in a positive light, he did influence so many of us about doing it right.”

Paula Hartman-Stein, Ph.D., is a geriatric mental health consultant, public speaker and educator. She and Georgoulakis produced training material on Medicare compliance plans and documentation suggestions. She can be reached through her website, www.centerforhealthyaging.com or email at paula@centerforhealthyaging.com.