

PRESIDENT'S LETTER | TROY ELANDER, MD

# My Inspirational Patient

**F**OR THIS END-OF-THE-YEAR President's Letter, I want to take a moment to reflect upon a patient of mine. We all have patients who do amazing things.

In our role as physicians, we are able to meet many individuals. Sometimes we meet truly remarkable people. This is one of the gifts we are given as doctors.

On a recent Saturday morning, I decided to finally take up my patient's offer to visit his workshop. For years this patient had been asking (bugging) me to see his shop. Usually I try to keep some separation between physician and patient outside of the office, perhaps because I was raised that way. But as I get older, I find I want to learn more about my patients, all they have to offer, and so I am beginning to break down my rules.

So, on this rainy fall Saturday morning, I brought my wife and 10-year-old son to my patient's house—down at the end of a long windy cul-de-sac. As we drove up the driveway, he waved to us from his workshop above the garage.

Inside was a 1,000 square foot loft full of machinery—drill presses, lathes, buzz saws—a metal and woodshop all in one. Mr. Fields used to be a furniture maker so he knows his way around the shop. When he retired from commercially making furniture he created this home space so he could tinker on personal projects.

With retirement he also began volunteering at the local Department of Veterans Affairs. There he worked in physical rehabilitation with veterans. As he saw the veteran's disabilities, his curious mind began thinking of ways to help—to invent devices to make these patients more self-sufficient and more efficient in their activities. He invented self-operating lifting devices to enable wheel chair bound vets to rise on their own to a standing position. He developed ingenious walking aides to lessen the number of assistants required to help the soldiers learn to walk again.

And then, he turned his attention to hand prostheses. As he states, lower limb prostheses were easy if one had a toilet plunger and a sawed-off broomstick. The hands, though, are more difficult. As his engineering mind worked, he figured out how to construct a grabbing device, easily attached to an upper arm with Velcro,



which could be simply manufactured and manipulated to grab a bucket of water or hold a pen. Simple, efficient, practical, and literally life-changing.

As Mr. Fields continued to tinker in his workshop, his prototypes have continued to be modified and improved. He then expanded his "reach" to those in need in the developing world. He talks of how children, in particular those in Africa, are harmed from land mines or vehicular, industrial or agricultural accidents, which instantly changes their lives. With these prostheses, made in a loft over a garage by a retired furniture maker, lives are being changed. To date, he has donated over 8,000 limbs in 56 countries, completely free of charge, to those so desperately in need.

Mr. Fields recalls living with his grandfather for 2 years when he was a young boy. His grandfather taught him, "If you are lucky enough to be here, you

might as well make a difference."

When I think of all those children whose lives are enhanced by this man working above his garage, I am inspired.

As our year winds to an end, I salute our patients who can show through their remarkable example how to make a difference in this world. May their efforts inspire us all.

I wish our readers of *Southern California Physician* a wonderful 2012. I hope that you and I can find the time this New Year to slow down, listen to our patients, and let them show us how remarkable they are.

Addendum: for those with further interest, please visit the web site [LN-4.org](http://LN-4.org) for further information.

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