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IN DEPTH: HEALTH CARE HEROES

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Dr. Jonathan Walker

Winner - Health care Provider – physician

Sally Bell

Correspondent

NORTH DALLAS -- The human body basically wants to be well, and it will heal naturally if doctor and patient provide what it needs, says Dr. Jonathan Walker.

And he finds that what a sick body often needs is a lifestyle change of rest, exercise and good nutrition rather than drugs and surgery.

"For almost every surgical condition there is another treatment if you start early enough," he said.

Walker is the medical director at Neuroscience Centers and a board-certified neurologist who primarily treats patients with multiple sclerosis or chronic pain.

Walker said he became a neurologist because he likes the "detective work" involved in finding solutions to obstinate medical problems.

"A lot of doctors are turned off by patients with chronic pain because of a lack of success," he said. "I like it because I can make a difference. With chronic pain, if you hang in there, you can nearly always help people get a lot better.

"My goal is to get patients well without surgery and without drugs-if possible," Walker said. "We are taught to make our bodies do what they are supposed to do. I teach people to listen to their bodies. Bodies have a powerful healing mechanism if we cooperate with it."

That attitude of treating the whole patient, rather than a collection of symptoms, is typical of Walker, said Rhonda Bowers, president of Neuroscience Centers.

"Very simply put, he became a doctor to help people feel better," said Bowers, who nominated Walker

for the Health Care Hero award. "What makes Dr. Walker stand out is that he really cares about people, and that leads him to look for innovative solutions to medical problems."

Although a traditionally trained physician, he's not hesitant to use alternative treatments that often are effective but cause less trauma to his patients. Early on, he began examining the frequently overlooked effects of exercise, nutrition and attitude on health.

He often recommends acupuncture, massage or chiropractic for pain treatment.

"I was taught in medical school that these were 'quackery.' Unless you have experience with alternative approaches, you tend not to believe they work, but they do," Walker said, adding that strong narcotics should only be a last resort.

His openness to workable solutions, regardless of where they are found, developed gradually after he earned his medical degree in 1965 from Baylor University's medical school in Houston.

"The first success I had in treating chronic neuromuscular pain was stretching exercises. The patients got better," he said. "Then I discovered that if they walked or swam, they got better. Those experiences very much affected my practice. Today, I first inquire about a patient's exercise and diet, which a lot of doctors don't do."

Walker is particularly excited now about the potentials of EEG biofeedback, or neurofeedback, in treating closed head injuries, insomnia, migraine and chronic pain. Walker is one of the few neurologists to use the emerging technique -- which teaches patients to alter their brain wave patterns toward a more normal state. Walker says that substantiating its benefits medically is one of his primary goals over the next several years.

A closed head injury, for example, "scrambles" the brain. Neurofeedback is a "powerful way to reorganize neural activity, thus alleviating the problem" without drugs.

Walker recently gained Food and Drug Administration approval to use a drug typically used to treat pulmonary fibrosis on a woman with MS. Her disease went into remission while taking the medication, and he now is testing it on additional MS patients

"It seems promising, but it's too early to project results," he said.

He also has found that vitamins and homeopathic treatments can be effective in treating fibromyalgia, or chronic muscle soreness.

"Drugs relieve symptoms. Homeopathy and vitamins aim at eliminating the cause," he said. "It's a very different approach, but the two are not mutually exclusive."

Walker believes the innovative therapy he uses today to eliminate pain will become standard in the future.

"Natural methods are already getting more accepted now," he said. "A lot of the future of medicine will be in alternative medicine of healing treatments rather than treating symptoms."

Bell is a free-lance writer living in Dallas.

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