October More Voices: Disability

Category: Disability
written by Paul Gross | October 1, 2025

Dear readers,

When I think of a disability, the image that pops into my head is that of Christopher Reeve, the sturdy, handsome, good-humored actor who played Superman in the movies and then suffered a horseback-riding accident that left him paralyzed from the neck down.

His story is a reminder of how fragile and uncertain health is, and how it can collapse under us at any moment—no matter how gifted or strong, handsome or fortunate we may be.

During my medical career I took care of many people who were disabled, although most of these disabilities didn’t involve wheelchairs or crutches.

I think of Joshua, a shy, fearful boy with autism, who wouldn’t make eye contact. Over the course, of years, Joshua stopped being afraid of me. One day, as a teenager, he greeted me, “Hi Doctor Gross,” when I walked into the room—a milestone.

I think of his warm, capable mother, whose patience and good cheer never ceased to amaze me. Would I have been half as good a parent to this child with special needs?

I think of my patient who was left blind after an operation on a nonmalignant brain tumor. She would come to appointments with her mother, who was also my patient. When I walked into the exam room, the two of them were always giggling about something. They both had a great sense of humor, and their visits sailed along on waves of laughter. One would have thought that the purpose of their appointments was to entertain the doctor.

While back pain was a common cause of disability among my patients, anxiety was even more common. Some patients missed appointments because leaving the house caused them such distress.

Oftentimes their anxiety was tied up with physical symptoms that we could never get to the bottom of, despite our best imaging studies. These visits were challenging for me, and I felt relieved when they came to an end and I could usher the patient out—although I often wondered what it would be like to be someone for whom the symptom and anxiety never left the room.

I wrote letters of excuse for patients who were driven frantic by the mere thought of jury duty—sitting in a courtroom in the presence of lawyers and police officers, hearing testimony and deciding someone’s fate.

And while I didn’t skip workdays, the anxiety that my patients described was not unfamiliar to me. Some Sundays, the thought of resuming work on Monday made me a little frantic as well, not because I didn’t want to see my patients but because of the time pressures and stresses that marked each day at our health center.

When I think of it, our health center itself suffered from a disability—namely, too few resources to address too great a need. Chronic understaffing at all levels led to a shortage of available appointments, to phone calls that went unanswered and to patient needs that fell through the cracks. One might say that our health center was on crutches, gimping along while those who showed up to work each day—support staff, nurses, doctors—tried heroically to prop it up and keep it moving.

This month's *More Voices* theme is Disability. What's your experience of having a disability, of providing care for someone with a disability or of having a family member with a disability?

Share your story using the *More Voices* Submission Form. For more details, visit *More Voices* FAQs. And have a look at last month's theme: The Exam Room.

Remember, your story should be 40-400 words. And no poetry, please.

We look forward to hearing from you. And thanks for being a part of the *Pulse* community.

Warmly,

Paul Gross
Editor