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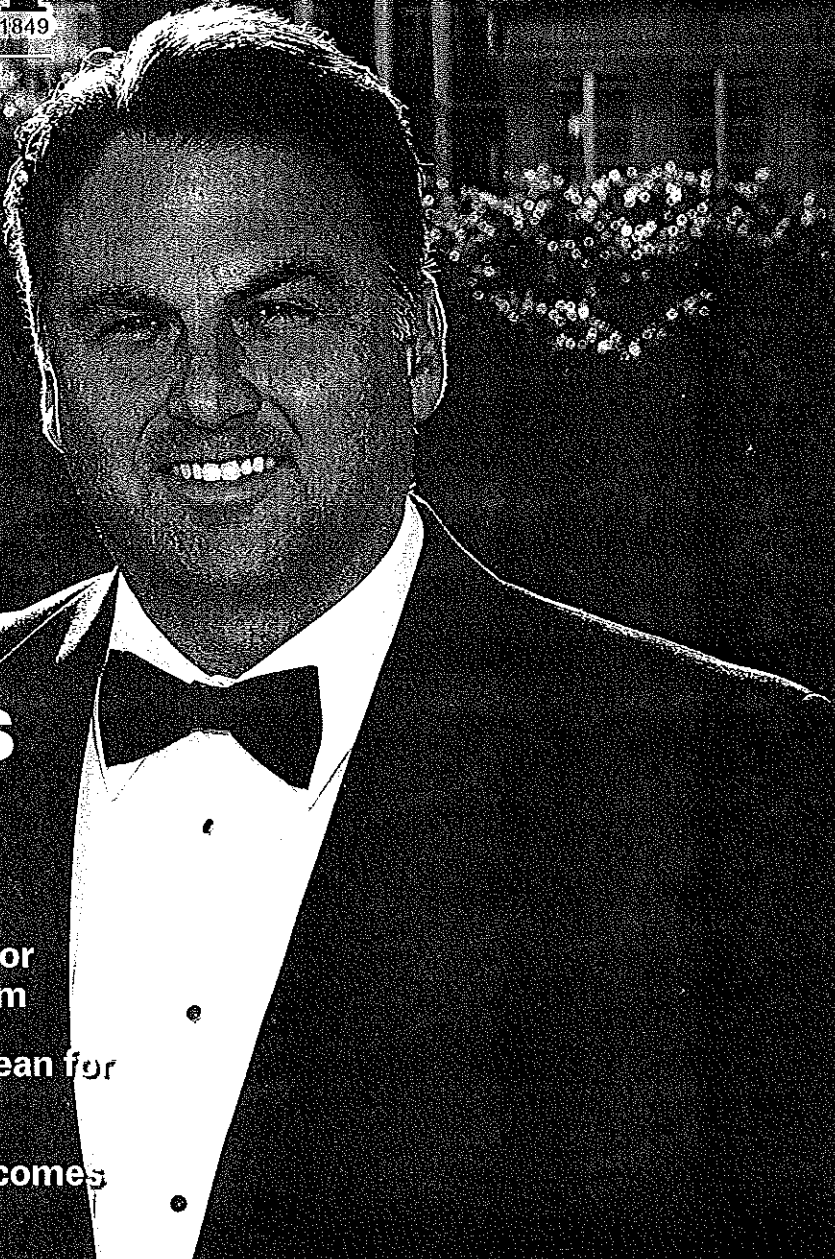
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The need to document bad outcomes



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J. Roy Rowland, M.D.: A voice for moderation in health care reform

By Thomas B. Gore, M.D.

Editor's Note: MAG Journal correspondent Thomas B. Gore, M.D., recently sat down to reminisce with J. Roy Rowland, M.D., who practiced family medicine in Dublin for 28 years and who served as a state representative from 1976 to 1982 and as a U.S. Representative from 1983 to 1995.

Arriving at the Community Mental Health Center in Dublin – about an hour southeast of Macon – I wondered just how far south I had really driven. Upon opening the car door on a hot, August afternoon, I was bombarded by a familiar swarm of small bugs on my face and in my ears. As I met J. Roy Rowland, M.D., for the first time, he let me know that, 'We are way below the gnat line here.' This was South Georgia at its finest. As we sat down to talk, Dr. Rowland, with an engaging smile and inviting brown eyes said, 'I still don't know why you wanted to drive three hours down here to talk with me.'

Dr. Gore (TG): I think the *Journal of the Medical Association of Georgia* readers will appreciate your experience. You have been around for a while.

Dr. Rowland (JRR): I certainly have. My wife, Luella, and I have three children and five grandchildren and four great-grandchildren... that tells you I've been here a while.

TG: I can appreciate that. Tell us about how you got into medicine in the first place.

JRR: Well, I grew up in Wrightsville in Johnson County and graduated high school there. It's just 18 miles from where we are now. On my mother's side of the family my grandfather was a pharmacist. He had a brother who was also a pharmacist and another brother who was a physician. Their father, my great grandfather, was also a physician. I really grew up in my granddad's drug store. It was a wonderful time in my life. After high school, I went to Emory at Oxford. Then in 1944, during World War II, I went into the Army. After my military service I went to South Georgia College in Douglas and then to the University of Georgia and then to the Medical College of Georgia (MCG) [in Augusta].

TG: What about political influence? Was anyone in your family in politics?

JRR: Yes, my father was a lawyer. He was solicitor general – what we now call a district attorney. He also was a Superior Court judge. My brother is an attorney. And my grandfather, Joe H. Rowland, served in the Georgia House and in the Georgia Senate around 1938. So I guess I came by this naturally.

TG: Tell me about your medical practice in Dublin.

JRR: I practiced for 28 years in a family practice and was board certified. I still have my state license. [Being in family medicine] was a really great experience. I was the sixth doctor in Dublin at the time. I had an extra year of training beyond my internship, so I did a lot of different things, [including] surgery and obstetrics. I delivered about 2,200 babies in my time.

TG: You went to MCG?

JRR: Yes. I finished in Augusta in 1952 – and we just had our 60th class reunion. In the beginning of my practice I was solo, then another doc and I formed a partnership and gradually we added doctors and eventually had six in our small group practice.

TG: Did you continue to practice as you got involved with politics?

JRR: I served six years in the Georgia House from 1976 to 1982, so I kept up my practice during those years. But when I went to Congress, I had to lay it down.

TG: What is your role now at this Community Mental Health Center?

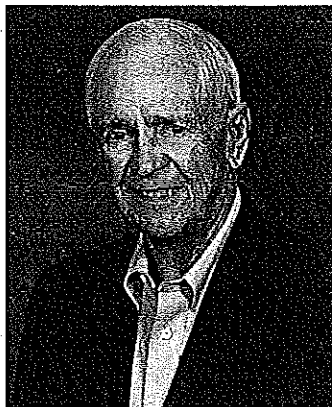
JRR: I've mainly been doing administrative work here for the past 12 years. I am not actually seeing patients or actively practicing, but I have enjoyed this work.

TG: Are you still involved with the medical college?

JRR: Yes, I serve on its board...have for several years. It is now the Georgia Health Sciences Health System Board. This board has jurisdiction over all the schools, including the medical school, the hospitals and clinics, and the physicians' practice group.

TG: Do you still maintain your contact with friends from the Medical Association of Georgia?

JRR: Yes, Dr. Joe Bailey in Augusta is a great friend. Always has been. He tells me I have done a lot of good for the medical school in Augusta over the years. I'm not sure about that, but that's what he says.



J. Roy Rowland, M.D.

TG: Now let's shift over to your political career. Tell me about your elections to the State House and then to Congress.

JRR: I first ran for the Georgia House – there was an open seat in 1976. Three of us from Dublin all ran in the Democratic primary. I managed to come out on top after a runoff. It was competitive, but we all remained good friends after the election and still are to this day.

TG: And what about your election to Congress?

JRR: That was 1982. I ran against an incumbent who had some ethical issues. I thought the district was ready for someone new. My wife, Luella, was a very important part of my campaign. She is a great campaigner. I won, I think, because people wanted a change. I remember well the first State of the Union address that I attended. I just couldn't believe that I was really there. It was quite an experience.

TG: How long did you serve in Congress?

JRR: Six terms for 12 years [1983-1995].

TG: Why did you get out?

JRR: I felt that I was out-of-step with the leadership in the Democratic Caucus. I became persona non grata in the caucus because I was working with Republicans on health care reform. And I just felt like it was time to come back home.

TG: Did you leave with a sense of satisfaction?

JRR: I did. It was a high honor. I made a lot of wonderful friends. Also, when I look back, I feel great satisfaction from the practice of medicine. When I did accomplish a few things in Congress, it was satisfying, but I would say there was also much satisfaction from my practice. Around here in Dublin, I am known much more for what I did as a doctor, than what I did in Congress.

TG: Now let's get into the details of health care reform a little. Can you tell me about your health care bill (H.R. 3955) the Rowland-Bilirakis Bill?

JRR: Mike Bilirakis, a Republican from Florida and I co-sponsored H.R. 3955. He and I came to Washington at the same time. We got along very well...thought the same about many things. We actually lived in the same place in D.C. at Justice Court. His wife and my wife were friends, too.

TG: What was the basic idea of the bill?

JRR: We wanted to create a network of Community Health Centers as the place where outpatient care would be provided for Medicaid, uninsured and underinsured patients. These would be run by a community board who would invest into the center by donation of their time or through financial contributions. The federal and state governments also would give financial support. We thought by having a stake in their own community health clinic, the local people would be motivated to help it succeed.

TG: Is this the same thing as what we now call the Federally Qualified Health Center or FQHC?

JRR: Yes, very similar, but with more local input. And we had a cost-control feature. It was planned as a capitated payment system. Patients would pay on a means-tested basis. There were several other things [the bill] did as well, including malpractice reform, health insurance reform, and administrative simplifications. It dealt with problem areas in health care.

TG: How did this legislation progress?

JRR: We saw a good bit of support, bi-partisan support – I would emphasize that – and at one time we had more than 100 co-sponsors of the bill, after starting with only five Democrats and five Republicans. It was seen as a moderate and reasonable way to improve our system.

TG: What ultimately happened to it?

JRR: We were eventually able to get it up for a hearing in the subcommittee. And that was it...that was as far as it got. There were several other competing bills. There was one by Bob Michel, the minority leader, one by Jim McDermott and a couple of others – and then the Clinton bill written by Mrs. [Hillary Rodham] Clinton.

TG: Sounds pretty tough to get to the top.

JRR: Oh yes. For example, take the Chair of the Energy and Commerce Committee at that time, Rep. John Dingell of Michigan. He told me that my bill would never see the light of day. And I knew it wouldn't, and told him so. Not that he didn't think my bill had merit – he simply wanted to get the Clinton bill through.

TG: Was there a lot of pressure on you on this committee?

JRR: Let me answer this way. I was one of three hold-outs who would not vote for the Clinton bill. One day Rep. Dingell asked me to meet him in the Speaker's Lobby. We stepped out onto the porch from the lobby and looked down the mall toward the White House. And I was told that if I would just give my support to the President's bill and vote to get the bill out of committee, that we would go down to the White House to meet with the President, and I could have anything I wanted. Anything.

TG: Wow. How did you deal with that?

JRR: I told him I wasn't going to vote for that bill. It wasn't my concept of what we needed to do. And I had been in Washington a while by then. I had learned that promises were not always kept.

TG: Do you still think that could have been a viable solution for the health care system?

JRR: Yes. And I still support that idea even now. I have continued to promote this idea in Georgia whenever I can.

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TG: What other memories do you have about your service?

JRR: I was given a seat on the Veterans Affairs Committee, which I had wanted from the beginning. There is a VA Hospital in Dublin and I thought that was a good fit for me. At the time, Larry McDonald and Ron Paul and I were the only three physicians in Congress. Then Larry was tragically killed when the Russians shot down the Korean airplane he was in. Paul ran for Senate in Texas and lost. So I was the only doctor in congress for four years. I wrote the legislation creating The National AIDS Commission, co-sponsored legislation for a constitutional amendment for a balanced budget, and several other pieces of legislation.

TG: What do you think will happen with the current difficult issue of care for the poor and the underprivileged?

JRR: I think government has a role to help those who cannot help themselves. But not like the [Patient Protection and] Affordable Care Act (PPACA). While many docs provide a lot of uncompensated care, I don't think it should be up to the individual doctor to always shoulder the burden.

TG: And what about managed care?

JRR: I think that has sucked a large amount of dollars out of the system. Money that should have gone to clinical care has instead gone to stockholders in large health care insurance companies. It may seem simple to some, but it is very complicated and very expensive. I have been against managed care since its beginning, and I still am.

TG: You have been very involved with community activities. Do you think that is important for doctors to do?

JRR: Yes, I do. I think that it is very important. Doctors by and large are still well respected in the community. And their involvement can do a lot of good. They need to use their influence to better their own community. I think they should get involved in civic clubs and volunteer work and be civic-minded.

TG: What would you say to any young doctors who may be thinking of entering political office?

JRR: I would encourage them. If they are interested, I think they should do it. And I think it is okay for them to speak up to support candidates who they think are good. I don't see a problem with them directly asking their patients to consider voting for certain people or issues of importance. Doctors can have a lot of influence in the community and I think they should exert it.

As I left the health center in Dublin, I had the strong feeling that I had just met one of the giants in medicine – in some ways unrecognized – and in many ways unrewarded and seemingly very humble about his service to the nation and to the profession. Maybe we can learn something from his record, his ideas, and his service. □

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*Donald J. Palmisano Jr. was featured as one of Georgia's
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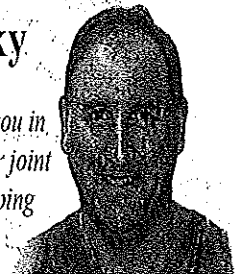
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