



Recovery

By Brian Sayers, MD
Chair, TCMS Physician Wellness Program and
Physician Health and Rehabilitation Committee

A few minutes into my interview the Dean of Admissions paused, looked at me, and asked, “Which of your parents was alcoholic?”. It was a fitting beginning for my six years there, getting a two-year degree and new perspective.

I had a good childhood. My father was a politician and lobbyist. Even through a child’s eyes I knew he was not like the other dads, but I didn’t understand that his drinking was the difference. He was not home much, but when he was there it was mostly good things that I remember. He loved milkshakes. He taught me to play chess and gin rummy. He let me drive the golf cart when we played golf. He took me to the Astrodome when it first opened, and one night we saw Jim Wynn hit a ninth inning homer that lit up the outfield wall. The summer I was 12 he tried to show me how to make butter like his east Texas family used to. We bought a hand cranked churn and for a whole weekend laughed and got sore hands while we tried unsuccessfully to make butter from pasteurized milk. Three months later he was gone.

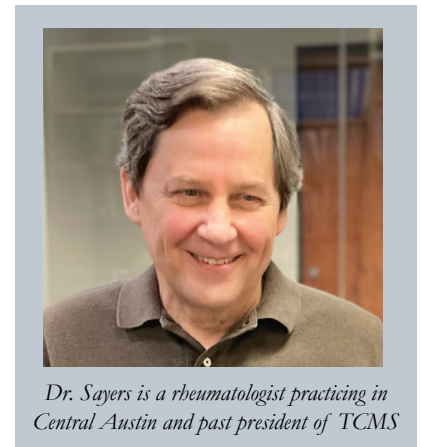
A dozen years later, I was a medical student at Parkland in Dallas. Like most of you, we saw our share of patients with end-stage cirrhosis, watching helplessly the terminal phases of their awful disease, often frustrated, sometimes belittling the “choices” they had made to this end. I knew my father had been transferred to Parkland the last week of his life, and late one night I scanned rolls of ancient microfilm to find his records. What I found was that he died in much

the same way as those I was caring for and on that very same floor. I don’t think anything in life has taught me more about how alike we all are—how equal—as much as we pretend differently. How fragile and flawed and yet still beautiful.

I joined the TCMS Physician Health and Rehabilitation Committee a decade ago and have served as chair the last several years, propped up by some very wise committee members. It has been an interesting journey to see in an intimate way how alcohol affects so many of our colleagues and the people who love them. Alcoholism is sometimes described as a disease of broken relationships. What more perfect role can there be for a society of colleagues than to help restore a sense of right relationships with colleagues in need? Most of the physicians we support in their recovery are also followed by the Texas Medical Board’s Physician Health Program, a program established to help physicians through a five-year program. TCMS provides a firewall between them and TMB as long as they are in compliance. A few will self-report to us or are referred from a colleague or family member requesting monitoring or intervention. We primarily serve as

an advocacy committee to help colleagues navigate recovery as they provide safe patient care. The success rate during this five-year program is impressive, and while those first few months are often rocky, by the end of the five years we have generally made a new friend and they are almost always solid in their recovery. Help is there for those whose lives have been ravaged by addiction nowadays that was not available for my father. There is nothing easy about their recovery, but it is easier if surrounded with love and support.

Alcohol addiction is enough of a tragedy for the alcoholic, but by its very nature it has profound ripple effects on virtually everyone they come in contact with. Guilt, shame, and other emotions may alter the trajectory of all involved. It is a mysterious disease. There are always unanswered questions. Gregory Boyle once wrote, “Just assume that the answer to every question is compassion,” and so let there be compassion for those who have yet to face their addiction, for those who struggle bravely through recovery, for their colleagues and loved ones who have carried part of that burden, and when needed, for yourself.



Dr. Sayers is a rheumatologist practicing in Central Austin and past president of TCMS

TCMS Physician Health and Rehabilitation Committee

**Struggling with addiction?
Concerned about a colleague?**

WE CAN HELP.

For more information, contact
Dr. Brian Sayers (bsayers@austin.rr.com) or
TCMS CEO Belinda Clare (bclare@tcms.com).