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HEALTH CARE

Five Questions With: Dr. Andrew Wilner

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Dr. Andrew Wilner is a neurologist, epilepsy specialist, and journalist from Fall River. He works for CompHealth as a locum tenens physician, filling in for physicians around the country. Wilner's his latest book, "Bullets and Brains," will be available this fall.

PBN: What is your forthcoming book, *Bullets and Brains*, about?

WILNER: "Bullets and Brains" is a collection of more than 100 essays, exploring the human brain and the everyday activities we do that can impact its function ... from neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease to sports concussions and video games. The essays meet at the intersection of science and daily life, so they'll be interesting to both the medical community and the inquisitive reader.

Bullets and Brains will be published early this fall. It will be available on Amazon as a soft cover, in local Rhode Island bookstores such as Island Books in Newport, and as a Kindle e-book. You can learn more about the book and get a sneak preview at bulletsandbrains.net.



PBN: What is a locum tenens physician? Do you do any work locally?

WILNER: I work with CompHealth as a locum tenens physician, one who temporarily fulfills the duties of another. This has allowed me to experience a wider range of disease pathology and patient interactions than an on-staff physician at a single hospital. Working with CompHealth allows me freedom with scheduling so I can fulfill both of my passions – writing and medicine. As a result of my experience traveling to different types of facilities and regions, my book became a true snapshot of the current neurology landscape. One of the great things about locum tenens is the chance to learn new things and face new challenges, which I always find very stimulating.

I went to medical school at Brown University and many years later was a clinical associate professor of neurology at Brown as well. From time to time, I work locally in New London, Conn., which I really enjoy.

PBN: How do you balance/blend your medical profession with your passion for writing?

WILNER: I believe that caring for patients is the most rewarding job in the world, but is also a demanding one. When I am caring for patients, it requires my full attention and I

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don't have time to write. The relatively new profession of a neurohospitalist is usually scheduled in one week blocks, working 24/7. This allows me to have a "total immersion" experience in patient care. When I am at the hospital, I often write down ideas for essays and stories; inspiration can strike anytime. When my hospital work is over and I transfer care to another neurohospitalist, I can shift gears, sit down at my desk, and write. Locum tenens work allows me to find a healthy balance of patient care and writing, and I believe that each of these activities enhances the other.

PBN: What advice do you have for consumers to keep their brains healthy?

WILNER: A healthy brain starts with a healthy lifestyle. Common sense things like avoiding toxic behaviors, eating a balanced diet, exercising, and seeing your doctor regularly (or any time you feel something is not right) will go a long way to maintaining maximum brain fitness. And I always tell my patients to give their brains a workout by trying new activities and learning new things!

Though it may seem obvious, keeping a brain healthy comes by keeping it safe. Though I love sports, I devote several essays in the book about how boxing, football, hockey, and other sports can be dangerous to our brains.

PBN: What do you view as the key issues facing your medical field? What exciting developments are on the horizon?

WILNER: The brain is the most complex organ in our body and people with neurologic disease have complicated problems that may be difficult to diagnose and treat. This process is demanding and takes time. One of the biggest challenges physicians face is the pressure to see an increasing number of patients more quickly. Abbreviated visits are even more difficult when there is more and more data in the form of sophisticated neuroimaging and blood tests that must be carefully reviewed. In addition, patients rightly want to know what is wrong with them and what their treatment options are, which requires thoughtful explanation. Perhaps even more importantly, physicians and patients must spend a certain amount of unhurried time together in order to develop a therapeutic alliance, which can enhance healing.

Another benefit of locum tenens work is that I can adjust my schedule to attend important conferences in my specialty where I can keep up on new developments and interact with colleagues from all over the world. I just attended the ECTRIMS (European Committee for Treatment and Research in Multiple Sclerosis) meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark. One of the most exciting developments in neurology is the rapid improvement in the understanding of the pathophysiology of disease and the development of potent, new therapies. At this conference, there were more than 1,000 papers being presented including research on several new drugs that may dramatically improve care for people with multiple sclerosis. That's exciting for physicians and patients.

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