

In Memoriam

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“There’s Always an Angle” – A Tribute to John R. Gates, MD

John Robert Gates died on September 28th, 2005, after a long fight against a Grade III astrocytoma. Close to one year ago, when he was presented with the diagnosis, John made an option that little surprised those who had the privilege of seeing him in action. The challenge should be faced with a mix of well thought out clinical approach, state-of-the-art technique, daring attitude and, most importantly, humbling dignity. The very same tools he had used throughout his successful academic and medical career. And so he did. In fact, little did he know, his ultimate lesson was in its course, and once again, he performed quite well.

About nine months ago I was among the few who were honored with the chance of spending time with John, during his routine treatment. At that point he had attended his last American Epilepsy Society Meeting (New Orleans, 2004) where he had given one of his final talks. That was accomplished with tremendous physical and emotional effort that he tried to disguise to the best of his possibility. Back in Minnesota he was righteously tired. Chemo and radiotherapy going on endlessly, a multiplicity of tests and exams disclosing a discouraging prognosis and yet, he was polite, funny, cooperative beyond tolerable and incredibly brave.

“There’s always an angle” was one of John’s favorite remarks. The one we all learned to exercise, in the search of the most feasible, if not the definite solution for whatever clinical or research task we were facing at the time. This past September John has met the one “angle” he could not possibly work out.

His obituary, published at the Star Tribune (Twin Cities’ renowned and influential newspaper) on September 30th, 2005 summarizes (in the elegant, but somewhat distant tone that characterizes such notes) some of John’s achievements. It reads as follows:

“John Robert Gates, MD, age 54, of North Oaks, MN, passed away on September 28, 2005, at the N.C.



Little Hospice in Edina, MN, after a courageous battle with cancer. Rita Meyer, his beloved and devoted wife of 15 years, was at his side. Dr. Gates was born on March 29, 1951, in Trenton, NJ. As a young man, he was identified as an academically talented student by A Better Chance (ABC), a non-profit organization dedicated to helping talented youth from the inner city. He was awarded entrance to a private college prep school and then graduated

Magna Cum Laude from Harvard University. Dr. Gates completed his medical internship, residency, and fellowship at the University of Minnesota Medical School, earning the Benjamin Shapiro Award for Most Outstanding Neurology Resident. Dr. Gates co-founded Minnesota Epilepsy Group, PA. in St. Paul, MN, and grew the practice into a world-renowned, comprehensive epilepsy treatment center. He authored hundreds of publications in his area of expertise and enjoyed a national and international reputation as an outstanding lecturer and teacher. He held many influential professional appointments and was a champion of medical research and development. Just before his death, the American Epilepsy Society awarded him the prestigious J. Kiffin Penry Award for Excellence in Epilepsy Care. He was beloved by his patients both for his brilliance in epilepsy and his warm and compassionate heart. His interests included flying, fishing, sailing, hiking, Celtic literature, and movies of all kinds. He was renowned for his big heart, his ready humor and quick wit, his endless devotion to his family and friends, his inveterate commitment to his profession, and the betterment of the lives of those with epilepsy. We will miss his warm touch, big hugs, and his enthusiasm and passionate zeal for living life to the fullest”.

John Gates was certainly larger than it encompasses his obituary. His path from a disadvantaged childhood, through the scholarship in Harvard and from there to the head of one of the leading tertiary epilepsy centers in the

world is nothing short from fantastic. His peculiar journey gave him the kind of astuteness exercised during his various teaching activities, filled with clever metaphors and analogies that made the joy of his listeners. John was a dedicated and equally demanding mentor. “You are welcome to play in my garden, as long as you don’t mess with my flowers” was his advice to new coming fellows. And one could be sure that he would not leave messages about misdeeds of some sort. He would come and tell you personally. Things would be cleared up left-and- right and no doubts left about the matter. We learnt to respect his style and to appreciate his accurate sense of justice.

John came to Brazil several times for both talks and leisure. He was always interested by the growing scientific material coming from Brazilian epilepsy centers. He was also genuinely admired by the geography, traditions, food and customs of Brazil. These features became very clear

to those who met him during his many trips to our country. He always had good things to say about us, in spite of his broad understanding of our social and political issues. Thus, it is probably fair to say that we, as a community, lost a scientific reference, as well as, a good and devoted friend.

Finally, on a very personal note, John will be always the person who trusted me when I had very little to offer him back. That evolved over the years to a level of friendship that we seldom find as grown up, mature individuals and vow to treasure it for the rest of our lives. For that, his loss is immensely felt. His memory, however, lives in the careers and minds of his former fellows, an “angle” that John Gates has mastered working during his time with us.

Respectfully,

*Luciano De Paola**

* Médico do Programa de Cirurgia de Epilepsia do Hospital de Clínicas da UFPR, Curitiba, PR. Editor convidado do JECN.