EDITORIAL

President's Page | How Living with a Chronic Disease Made Me a Better Physician and Leader

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Keywords: Chronic Disease, Chronic, Disease, Rheumatoid Arthritis, RA, Katherine Pannel, Pannel, Dr. Pannel, Leadership, Empathy

https://doi.org/10.67225/001c.164063

Journal of the Mississippi State Medical Association

Vol. 67, Issue 5/6, 2026

As physicians, we spend our careers caring for patients with chronic diseases. We counsel them through diagnoses, treatment plans, setbacks, and victories. We witness the resilience required to manage a condition that does not simply go away after a course of treatment.

What we often do not discuss is what happens when the physician becomes the patient.

In 2020, I received a diagnosis that would forever change the way I view healthcare, not as a physician, but as a patient. Like many individuals living with rheumatoid arthritis, I quickly learned that managing a chronic disease is not a single event but an ongoing journey. While I would never have chosen this path, it has given me a deeper appreciation for the challenges our patients face every day. It has shaped me into a better physician, a more thoughtful advocate, and a more compassionate leader.

The first lesson was humility.

Physicians are trained to solve problems. We gather information, develop plans, and help patients navigate uncertainty. Chronic disease has a way of reminding us that not everything can be fixed on our timeline or even on the first try. Chronic diseases have a way of humbling even the most experienced physicians because it reveals and reminds us that there are limits to medicine. There are days when progress is measured not by dramatic improvement but by perseverance. Experiencing that reality firsthand has given me a deeper appreciation for the challenges many of our patients face every day.

The second lesson was empathy.

I have always cared deeply about my patients, but living with a chronic condition has allowed me a better understanding of the emotional burden that often accompanies illness. Patients are not simply managing symptoms; they are managing careers, families, finances, relationships, and fears about the future. What may seem like a minor inconvenience in the healthcare system can feel overwhelming to someone already carrying the weight of a chronic illness.

That perspective has influenced the way I practice medicine and the way I approach leadership. It has reinforced my belief that healthcare policy discussions must always begin and end with the patient experience.

The third lesson was resilience.

Chronic disease teaches you to adapt. Plans change. Expectations must be adjusted. Some setbacks require persistence and determination. Over time, you learn that resilience is not about never struggling; it is about continuing to move forward despite challenges. But also acknowledging that resilience is not infinite and self-care is nonnegotiable.

Leadership often requires the same mindset.

Whether advocating for physicians, addressing workforce shortages, combating misinformation, or pushing for meaningful healthcare reform, progress is rarely immediate. The work requires patience, persistence, and a willingness to keep showing up. Living with a chronic disease has strengthened those qualities in me and has reminded me that meaningful change often comes one step at a time.

Perhaps the most important lesson has been the value of community.

No one successfully manages a chronic disease alone. Family members, friends, colleagues, healthcare professionals, and support networks all play an important role. The same is true in organized medicine. The Mississippi State Medical Association is strongest when physicians come together in support of one another and in service to our patients and communities.

Living with a chronic disease has not defined me, but it has shaped me. It has made me more patient, more empathetic, more resilient, and more appreciative of the trust patients place in us every day.

As I reflect on my year serving as President of the Mississippi State Medical Association, I am grateful for the perspective this journey has provided. It has reminded me that leadership is not about having all the answers. It is about listening, learning, adapting, and serving others with compassion and purpose.

Those lessons were learned not only in the physician's office, but also in the patient chair.

And for that, I am profoundly grateful.

Submitted: June 15, 2026 CDT. Accepted: June 15, 2026 CDT. Published: June 15, 2026 CDT.