Andrew T. Parsa, MD, PhD, 1966–2015: living the dream

Jeffrey N. Bruce, MD

Neurological Institute, Columbia University, New York, New York

Andrew Thomas Parsa, MD, PhD, a talented neurosurgeon renowned as a gifted clinician, innovative researcher, and effective mentor, died suddenly on April 13, 2015 (Fig. 1). He was one of the most productive neurosurgeons of his generation and in his brief time built an illustrious career with contributions in the clinical, research, and educational realms of neurosurgery.

Andy was born on August 24, 1966, in Brooklyn, New York, to Micheline and Ismail Parsa, MD. His mother was a nurse, and his father was a renal organ transplant and cancer immunology researcher and professor of pathology at SUNY Downstate Medical Center. Andy grew up in New Canaan, Connecticut, where he excelled as a student and athlete. He entered Yale University in 1984 and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in molecular biophysics and biochemistry. He had been recruited as a soccer player and helped win the Ivy League Championship in his senior year.

Following a lifelong calling to be a physician, Andy enrolled in Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn, New York, in 1988. He earned his Doctor of Medicine degree as well as a Doctor of Philosophy degree in immunology and cell biology, finishing the program in 1996. His medical school years provided an opportunity to work with Dr. John Miller and other Downstate neurosurgery faculty. In what was to become the exciting start of a dynamic research career in glioma immunology and vaccine therapy, Andy initiated a clinical trial evaluating an adjuvant-linked vaccine for recurrent gliomas.

While at Downstate, Andy was inducted into the Alpha Omega Alpha Medical Honor Society and also received an award for outstanding achievement in clinical neurology, as well as first prize in the Alpha Omega Alpha Student Research Symposium. Following graduation, he was accepted into the neurosurgery residency training program at Columbia University’s Neurological Institute under the soon-to-be-retired chairman, Dr. Bennett Stein. Andy completed an internship in general surgery at Columbia before proceeding to his neurosurgical residency in 1997 under the mentorship of chairman Dr. Robert Solomon. His neurosurgical research career began in earnest in the laboratory of Dr. Jeffrey Bruce where he developed interests in antiglioma immunity at a laboratory and translational level. During his Columbia residency, Andy was known as an indefatigable worker destined for a celebrated career in academic neurosurgery. His infectious sense of humor, kindness, and empathy resulted in lifelong friendships along a spectrum of attending physicians, residents, hospital staff, and support personnel.

In 2002, chairman Mitchel S. Berger, MD, recruited Andy as an assistant professor of neurological surgery at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). He rapidly rose through the faculty ranks, becoming a tenured professor in 2011 as well as vice chair of the Department of Neurological Surgery. He was the first recipient of the Reza and Georgianna Khatib Endowed Chair in skull base tumor surgery. His prolific clinical practice was focused on brain tumors, skull base tumors, and spinal cord tumors.

Andy established a successful laboratory in glioma immunology and immunotherapy where he maintained continuous National Institutes of Health (NIH) support, initially as part of a Career Development Award and K08 Award, then as project leader in the UCSF Brain SPORE (Specialized Programs of Research Excellence) grant, and most recently via an R01 grant. As a resident, he was...
the recipient of the Elsberg Award through the New York Society of Neurosurgery, as well as the Preuss Resident Research Award from the American Association of Neurological Surgeons. As an attending physician, he received the Young Clinical Investigator Award, the Mahaley Clinical Research Award, the American Brain Tumor Association Clinical Research Award, the Integra Foundation Award, and a Journal of Neuro-Oncology Award through the AANS/CNS Joint Section on Tumors. In his prolific career, he published more than 300 peer-reviewed articles, review chapters, and monographs.

Andy had a gift for establishing personal connections, which made him a magnet for attracting students and trainees seeking mentorship. Among his major accomplishments is an impressive record of mentoring not only students and residents but young faculty as well. He was twice awarded the Harold Rosegay Resident Teaching Award at UCSF and in 2010 was awarded the UCSF Mentor of the Year by the School of Medicine.

In 2013, Andy was recruited to Northwestern University as the Michael J. Marchese Professor and Chair of Neurological Surgery in the Feinberg School of Medicine. In addition, he was co-leader of the Translational Research in Solid Tumors Program at the Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center. In a brief period of time, he managed to elevate the department, expanding its faculty, surgical case volume, NIH research funding, and overall academic profile.

Andy’s clinical innovations extended into expansion of treatment paradigms for patients with skull base tumors, including the concept of a hybrid approach of surgery and radiosurgery. Among his major accomplishments was basic research creating vaccines using patient’s innate glioblastoma tumor tissue and a heat shock protein process. The subsequent innovative Phase II trial with autologous heat shock protein tumor vaccine was pioneering in the realm of personalized medicine. Early results of this experimental cancer vaccine showed promising potential for extending longevity and improving quality of life in newly diagnosed and recurrent malignant gliomas. These studies were still ongoing at the time of his passing.

Despite his ambitious schedule, Andy provided service and leadership at a national level in many areas. He served with distinction on the editorial boards of Neurosurgery and the Journal of Neurosurgery. He was an ad hoc reviewer for multiple journals and was a co-editor of Neurosurgery Clinics of North America. He was a major contributor to the AANS/CNS Joint Section on Tumors where he served on multiple committees and was scheduled to assume the position of chair later this year. His service extended not only to multiple editorial boards and patient advocacy boards, but also to NIH study sections and scientific advisory councils. He was a sponsoring mentor for multiple NIH F32 Awards and K99 Awards for residents and junior faculty.

Andy was a highly sought after lecturer at many major medical centers, both in the United States and around the world. He was a visiting professor at multiple institutions, as well as a participant or leader in multiple seminars in neurooncological surgery and research.

Andy’s educational talents extended beyond formal lectures. He was an exceptional teacher both in the operating room as well as the clinics, frequently giving impromptu teaching vignettes to medical students and residents, and creating a culture of scholarship and education wherever he went. He would often branch out to local hospitals and even to nearby grade schools and high schools to stimulate and encourage interest in medicine and neuroscience.

Andy’s academic accomplishments were impressive, but how he accomplished them was even more remarkable. He made everyone around him better, making him or her feel like a valuable member of the team. He was passionately loyal and generous to his friends and colleagues, and took great joy in bringing together different groups, often at informal dinners that he would host with bountiful food, wine, and spirited conversation. He had a wickedly sharp sense of humor and was particularly adept at one-liners.

Andy was famously approachable and eager to help those in need. Combining an energetic style, brilliant insights, and passion for teaching, he transformed the cultures of the places he worked, establishing lifelong and committed relationships with collaborators and colleagues. His work ethic was driven by a fierce urgency and he approached every goal with the intensity and work ethic of someone who knew from hard-won experience that our days are finite. He packed a full-to-bursting lifetime into 48 years, the memory of his own father’s early demise at 54 years a constant goad to action. In his career, Andy pursued the most challenging areas of neurosurgery: clinically the treatment of skull base tumors, and at a research level in the eradication of glioblastoma, one of the most deadly tumors known.

Despite his nearly superhuman workload and commitment to helping others live their dreams, Andy was a dedicated family man. His wife, Charlotte Shum, MD, whom he met when they were both surgical interns at Columbia, was the love of his life. An associate professor of orthopedic surgery at Northwestern, Charlotte was the archetypical great woman behind the great man. She was his confidante, sounding board, and greatest admirer. He took immense comfort in her loyalty and support as they built their dream life together. Andy took great pride in their three children, Julia, Micheline, and Ismail. An active and enthusiastic father, he loved attending their athletic events and walking them to school.

Andy is survived by two younger siblings—his brother, Tim, an entrepreneur, and his sister, Tania, an emergency room physician—and their children, his three beloved nephews, the youngest of whom carries the honor of Andy’s name. Dr. Parsa’s life was far too brief but it was packed with achievement, kindness, and love. He will be sadly missed.

http://thejns.org/doi/abs/10.3171/2015.5.JNS151041

Acknowledgment

The editorial assistance of Tim Parsa is gratefully acknowledged.