

By Jean Légaré, emeritus member of the Consumer Advisory Council  
Laval University  
Saturday, November 8, 2008

Mr. President,  
Ms. Secretary General,  
Distinguished guests,  
Dear family members and friends.

I want to sincerely thank you Mr. Brière for awarding me this Honorary Doctorate. It is a great honour Laval University is extending to me in welcoming me into its large family of graduates. Receiving such an honour is not common, especially when it is related to volunteer work. I receive this homage with great humility, but, as paradoxical as it may seem, I receive it with great pride on behalf of the 4.4 million Canadians living with arthritis. I was chosen to be honoured, but this recognition reflects on several members of my family, particularly my wife Lise. She has been steadfast in supporting me in the difficult moments of my disease and encouraging me in all that I undertake to raise arthritis awareness. To my children Simon, Christine and Johanne as well as to their spouses and to my grand children, thank you for giving me the energy and determination to make things happen.

I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis 23 years ago, in 1985. In February 1993, the disease precipitated a hospital admission and this is where this great adventure began. A friend, Roger Chabot who came to visit me, offered me a membership card with l'Association des arthritiques de Québec. What an original gift! It was the beginning of my long discovery of the arthritis world. Like the researchers from Laval University and the Research Centre in Rheumatology and Immunology, I am making new discoveries every day. And this is what is fascinating and motivating! There is hope ...a lot of hope.

I have to admit that my life with arthritis has not always been easy. Living in pain 24 hours per day, seven days a week, waking up in the middle of the night because it hurts too much, drained all my energy and my morale. The arthritis management learning curve has been long and steep. I have learned by trial and error while trying not to repeat my mistakes. I don't know any easier way to achieve this.

But, having lived these experiences, having learned what to do and what to avoid, having learned how to better manage the pain, having distanced myself from the downward spiral, hope came back. It is only then that I decided I wanted to be an active participant in the management of my disease. I wanted to know more about the causes, the treatments, research, and education; I wanted to know everything about arthritis. I opened my mind to the outside world. Over time, I met many extraordinary people living with arthritis who, in their own way, are actively participating in advancing the knowledge of future health professionals and decision makers in our society while increasing public knowledge of arthritis.

My modest participation to the training of medical students and future health professionals at Laval University by sharing my experience and knowledge gained from living with arthritis is very rewarding in all aspects. The students don't have eyes big enough to see everything we are demonstrating! Their comments are always very positive, gratifying and motivating for me.

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It has happened to me many times when meeting with a politician to take some of their precious time to kill some myths like: "Arthritis is just part of the normal aging process of any human being." Every time, I felt my message was making its way and I was participating in their education. I felt exactly the same when presenting on arthritis to the general public. I have always had the same message: "Arthritis can strike the youngest, and oldest members of our society and everyone in between: arthritis is NEVER normal."

The full inclusion of consumers in arthritis research is new. It occurred as a result of the formation of the Canadian Arthritis Network. This research network has a vision of a world free of arthritis. It is part of the Networks Centres of Excellence of Canada, just like ArticNet, here at Laval University. Since its inception in 1998, The Canadian Arthritis Network has given a voice to arthritis consumers in all its operating and decision-making committees. The consumer role has greatly evolved over the years, but the consumer commitment in research planning and management is unique. Other agencies and organizations both in Canada and throughout the world are duplicating this model of consumer involvement in health research. Sometimes the questions we pose may appear irrelevant but they are effectively re-positioning the research in focusing on the person living with arthritis. This is the ultimate goal: improve the quality of life of persons fighting arthritis.

The Medicine School at Laval University is financially supporting PhD students in their initial research projects. The research fund on arthritis and other rheumatic diseases is helping the students in leveraging research funding. Sometimes this type of support is making all the difference. We have to support the trainees. They are our future! We have the obligation to help them with all our energy.

We should never forget that The Arthritis Society is one of the major financial supporters of arthritis research in Canada. Many among us are saying that there is not enough research done on arthritis and I agree with them. However, I can confirm that there are many research projects underway. Research means hope to all those suffering from this terrible disease. The Arthritis Society is also the only Canadian not-for-profit organization with the mission of providing education and care programs that benefit the persons living with arthritis. In my personal journey in the arthritis world, I thank them for all the support they are giving me.

The second verse of the Hymn of Laval University which is entitled " Knowledge and beauty " – "Savoir et beauté" composed by Ms. Jeanne Landry, Professor Emeritus at the faculty of music summarizes very well my journey with arthritis:

(In French) « Étudier, rêver  
Tour à tour croire et douter  
Créer, inventer  
Rire et fraterniser  
Observer l'univers  
En sonder tous les mystères  
Courtiser en dansant  
Les chemins de l'infini »

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My not very accurate translation to English:

“Learn and Dream  
Believe and then, doubt  
Create, invent  
Laugh and fraternize  
Observe the entire world  
Probe all the unknown  
Woo in dancing  
The roads to the infinite”

Thank you very much!