

Grand Marshal Address May 26, 2003

Dr. Jeffrey Fudin

Good morning American Veterans, fire fighters, law officers, distinguished public officials, friends, family, and citizens of the Capital District...it is my honor to stand before you today as a Grand Marshal in this parade to help honor our American Veterans.

My colleague and friend Anthony Mariano and I were invited here today by the Capital District Joint Council on Veterans Affairs to lead your parade. I remain humbled by this honor and feel privileged to share a few words with you this morning.

To introduce myself, I am a Clinical Pharmacist specializing in Pain Management at the Stratton VA Medical Center in Albany. Several years prior to this assignment, I served as a clinician in our Cancer Clinic. I was told by Mr. Wiest that my invitation today is "for keeping my priorities straight when caring for veterans at the Stratton VA Medical Center". The veterans that I am privileged to serve encourage me each day to fulfill that commitment.

For some background, in 1976 I attended college locally at the Albany College of Pharmacy. This was supposed to prepare me for the tasks ahead, for the "real world". In some ways, that extensive training was like boot camp. Afterwards, I entered a fellowship program at Upstate Medical Center to specialize in cancer medicine and later I completed my graduate training.

In 1982 my career as a staff pharmacist began at the Stratton VA Medical Center. In 1983 I was asked to develop an oncology program where the pharmacist would become an integral part of the cancer care team. This role involved direct patient care. It was very stimulating for me as I began to participate in exciting new cancer research programs. Following completion of my doctorate, I continued full time at the Stratton VA as a Board Certified Specialist in Pain Management.

Let me preface the remarks that follow by saying, I truly believe the VA Medical Center in Albany and those throughout our country offer some of the finest most advanced medical services in the world.

As a non-veteran civilian I will never fully understand the life and thoughts of a combat soldier. However, the veterans I care for daily bring me closer to understanding the debt we Americans owe to these servicemen and servicewomen. Since I for once in my life was at a loss for what I might speak about today, I decided to compare some of my own experiences with those of our esteemed veterans.

What is it that ultimately led me to be standing before you today?

Approximately 1994, I had several questions and concerns regarding certain subversive research activities in our cancer program. This was a turning point in my career. I had to decide whether to leave cancer care and ignore my findings or confront medical

colleagues and VA administration regarding these improprieties. For a career serviceman the choices are clear; disobeying an officer is not an option...and usually for good reason. The difference here of course is that I was working in civil service and had a professional, moral, and ethical obligation to assure our veteran patients were receiving the best and safest care according to acceptable medical practice guidelines. My service manager (and co-Grand Marshal today) Anthony Mariano supported my concerns. All veterans know how important it is that your commanding officers support your activities. This was no exception.

At the time, it was clear that patient safety and professional integrity trumped potential career risks. That decision would shape the next nine years of my life and affect my total existence, my family, friends, colleagues, co-workers and veteran patients. I immediately became the victim of calculated sophisticated harassment by VA officials locally, regionally, and perhaps at the national level. The conduct of these people was unconscionable. On a daily basis I was on constant alert for the next retaliatory battle. The stress and unrest I felt daily were indescribable and resulted in paranoia 24/7. This became my battlefield. I was fortunate to have a "superior officer", Anthony Mariano (Pharmacy Manager) helping to watch my back as I continued to care for our patients and question certain patient care activities. For Mr. Mariano's support I remain grateful. As a result however, my manager placed himself in the "line of fire". Any combat veteran can tell you how important it is to have the support of your comrades and commanding officer. Mr. Mariano was terminated from his position after more than 20 years of government service and unrelenting dedication to our veterans. Many medical colleagues fought along with me to the extent they could, while hiding behind the brush, so as not to be spotted by potential snipers. My exciting but routine professional career at the VA became a hostile battlefield.

On December 7, 2001 I was terminated from my position of Clinical Pharmacy Specialist in Pain Management. This news came to me just a few months after Mr. Mariano was terminated. I lost the battle on that field, but the combat would continue. After a federal court hearing on April 1, 2002, an administrative judge found no wrongdoing on my part and ordered that I be reinstated as an employee at the Stratton VA. Unfortunately, my colleague Mr. Mariano continues to fight his battle.

At a recent clinic visit, a veteran looked into my eyes and said; "Dr. Fudin, you couldn't possibly understand the pain I feel. I am depressed. I want to kill myself the pain is so bad. I can barely get out of bed in the morning. I can't sleep more than 2 hours a night. If I do sleep, I have nightmares about combat in Viet Nam. My wife tries to console me, but she doesn't understand the amount of emotional and physical pain I feel. I can't work because of the pain. My friends and family stay away from me because the pain makes me a nasty person. I'm really not a bad person. You did not fight in combat...you couldn't possibly know what I am feeling?"

TRUE ENOUGH! I cannot fully understand his pain. I cannot comprehend the suffering he and his family have endured throughout his life as a result of what he has given to this country.

My patient was correct in saying I could never fully understand his pain. I did however feel somewhat connected with his suffering, lack of sleep, stress to family, and stress to his friends. It is incredible how anxiety can overtake one's life and moreover how it can effect your family, friends, and colleagues. This experience truly helped me to better understand our veterans, but at the same time raises certain questions in my mind. How does a veteran cope on a daily basis with the stresses of combat that continue to plague their mind? How do veterans and their families deal with anger that is left from certain combat stressors that may have developed throughout one's military career? While I can't pretend to know these answers, I feel closer to our veterans because I share some of their anxieties and many of their healthcare goals and expectations. I fought a battle to maintain and improve upon those goals and expectations.

During my last several years at the VA, veteran patients have rallied together to support me as evidenced in part by this invitation today. My family was affected in ways I can't describe. I would like to publicly acknowledge my family today for supporting me throughout my years of intellectual and political combat. The support I received from veteran patients has been overwhelming and heartwarming. I received telephone calls from veteran patients during the seven months I was not at the VA. This has brought me closer to understanding the support and closeness veterans feel for their comrades. Pharmacy, medical, and nursing colleagues communicated with me daily for seven months to show their support for my case against VA officials. This overwhelming majority reflects the good moral and ethical character that our Albany clinicians possess. Our veterans should be comforted to know that the professional staff at the Stratton VA Medical Center is there because they are good people who are dedicated to their careers and to caring for veteran patients.

Who are these veterans I am privileged to care for? *(I would like to answer that by sharing a passage I borrowed from a website called "Veterans Search")*

They are the three anonymous heroes in The Tomb Of The Unknowns, whose presence at the Arlington National Cemetery must forever preserve the memory of all the anonymous heroes whose valor dies unrecognized with them on the battlefield or in the ocean's sunless deep.

He is the old guy bagging groceries at the supermarket - palsied now and aggravatingly slow - who helped liberate a Nazi death camp and who wishes all day long that his wife were still alive to hold him when the nightmares come.

They are ordinary and yet extraordinary human beings, persons who offered some of their lives most vital years in the service of their country, and who sacrificed ambitions so others would not have to sacrifice theirs.

They are soldiers and saviors and a sword against the darkness, and nothing more than the finest, greatest testimony on behalf of the finest, greatest nation ever known.

They are the persons who fought for freedom of speech enabling me to speak out to you today without reservation.

I will end by sharing a statement made at my April 1, 2002 hearing by one of our own regional VA Officials. A question was asked to him regarding the **quality** and **appropriateness** of care that I provided to a veteran patient. The local official replied; **“The quality of care was not the issue”**. On the contrary, quality of care will **always** be the primary issue and should always receive top priority by any healthcare provider. Irrespective of potential barriers, I promise to continually uphold quality care at the Stratton VA to the extent I am able.

God bless our veterans, the medical professionals who care for them, and the servicemen and servicewomen throughout the world who work daily to keep this the greatest free nation on earth.