



OP-ED: MICHAEL J. FOX'S NEW SHOW KEEPS PARKINSON'S FRONT AND CENTER

JILL M. FARMER | SEPTEMBER 26, 2013

Busy and full of life, Fox's character helps dispel myths about disease he lives with



I recently viewed Michael J. Fox's 1999 testimony to the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee and noted the severity of his Parkinson's symptoms at that time.

Fox said he made a deliberate decision to appear before the committee without medication to show the true effects of the disease and underscore that so much more needs to be done to fund Parkinson's research. A few years after that appearance, Fox's symptoms worsened and he semiretired from acting.

I am sure no one back then would have imagined that today the actor would be starring -- yet again -- in his own television comedy. The Michael J. Fox Show premieres September 26. As a neurologist leading a program that specializes in movement disorders, such as Parkinson's, I am thrilled to see the lead character of a major program live a full and robust life with Parkinson's.

Fox already is a hero to those of us in the Parkinson's community. The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research has funded some \$350 million in research and, equally important, worked to bring scientists together from around the globe. The foundation has worked to energize the pharmaceutical industry to find treatments and cures. There has been promising progress.

Now, Fox will use his abundant optimism and humor to dispel myths about Parkinson's. The main character of the Michael J. Fox Show has Parkinson's, but nonetheless will be busy at work as a television newsman with an active family life.

Parkinson's affects more than 1 million Americans; it is not just a disease of old age. In fact, as many as 20 percent of those diagnosed with the disease are under the age of 50, and half of those are diagnosed before the age of 40.

The death rate from Parkinson's in **New Jersey is 6.2 per 100,000**, slightly below the national average of 6.37 per 100,000.

Fox's return to his own show inspires those of us working in the field. As his symptoms worsened, Fox found that an older medication could help him. According to interviews, Fox now takes a medication that has been around for some time. Its use allows him to control his dyskinesia, or involuntary movements, enough to let him to star in his own show.

This actor's experience shows that treatment must be tailored to each person and continually updated and fine-tuned. A medication that might not have helped in the past may help in the future.

Today, we have approaches not readily available when Fox was first diagnosed, such as deep brain stimulation, the implantation of a medical device that sends electrical impulses to specific parts of the brain. (Fox received a thalamotomy, which is the surgical removal of a selected portion of the thalamus, in the brain, and is therefore no longer a candidate for deep brain stimulation.) We also now offer new medications as well as physical therapy and rehabilitation. It is so important

that anyone with Parkinson's build a trusting relationship with a physician and medical team having a long-term commitment to this chronic disease.

I hope Fox inspires those who thought there was nothing else that could be done for them. I urge these individuals to seek out a movement disorders specialist to update their care and treatment. As we can see from Fox, those with Parkinson's should not give up if medications stop working.

Just as important, the Michael J. Fox Show will show how humor helps the main character cope with everyday life. In the show, for example, a police officer dashes into Fox's fictional apartment because he mistakenly dialed 911 with his wayward fingers. The cop wants his autograph because, "My uncle has Alzheimer's."

"I have Parkinson's," Michael responds. "Either way," the cop says. In the show someone describes him as being the "pinnacle" of health.

"I wouldn't say 'pinnacle,'" the character responds.

Fox knows the role he has in the field. He told an interviewer that he recognizes "the gift" he has been given to make a difference in the lives of people with Parkinson's. Being Michael J. Fox, he jokingly called it "the gift that keeps on taking." I laughed but still beg to differ.

As someone who sees people with Parkinson's nearly every day, I see Fox as a true asset toward raising awareness and attracting dollars for research. I hope you will watch this show to find inspiration. I know I will.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED ©2013 NJSPOTLIGHT