

# Editor's Notes

## Incivility—A Destructive Force in Politics as well as in Medicine

By Stephen Jackson, M.D., Editor

A short time ago, I had the pleasure of attending the peripatetic biennial meeting of the international Laurel and Hardy appreciation organization (the “*Sons of the Desert*,” named after their arguably most famous film) right here in Sacramento. As with all of *aficionado* attendees, I am enthusiastic about preserving the memory of Laurel and Hardy and their films, hoping that their comedic genius might be savored by future generations. On the opening day of this festive meeting, the entire throng of over 300 loyal fans posed for a commemorative photograph on the steps of the State Capitol. At that moment, it occurred to me that the jury was out on whether the biggest jokes in Sacramento that day resided within the Capitol building or on those steps. I could visualize Stan and Ollie shaking their heads in lamentation and almost hear them chiding our legislators with an authority untainted by historical perspective: “Here’s another fine mess you’ve gotten us into.”



The persistent inability of our elected state officials, collectively and accountably, to enact responsible legislation—with the goal of achieving economic viability and social stability for our endangered state—is of grave concern to most Californians. Moreover, there is an analogous situation at the federal level, a state of affairs that is not new to our nation’s politics. Indeed, Ron Chernow<sup>1</sup> recounts how our founding fathers used “vehement” disagreements and “vitriolic rhetoric” to advance conflicting political philosophies, they too undermining civil and respectful public discourse with their deplorable oratory. Undeniably, much of today’s paralytic problem appears to flow from the highly partisan behavior of our elected lawmakers who comprise our state and federal legislative bodies, which, in turn, have become highly polarized within a milieu of unceasing contentiousness and outright *animus*. Unfortunately, unlike most of our founding fathers—the passionate spearheads of the American Revolution and framers of our Constitution—few of our present day elected officials could be lauded for their “erudition, integrity and philosophical genius.” The prevailing winds of *incivility* and the absence of a fundamental and firmly grounded will to compromise heighten the probability that elected legislators and leaders will fail to advance the issues vital to the well-being of their constituencies.

The uncivil behavior of our legislators—their failure to engage in respectful and civil discourse—has elevated the level of partisanship to dysfunctional heights.

## Editor's Notes (cont'd)

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Furthermore, legislators' *incivility* to each other not only reflects, but sadly, also amplifies what appears to be a progressive *incivility* amongst American citizens themselves, their own unwillingness to listen respectfully to each other, and to consider each other's opinions. After all, *civility* has its root in the Latin word for "citizen" (*civis*), and implies a *shared sense of identity*, a notion that one often would be hard pressed to find or experience within our dysfunctional social fabric.

As civil is the root word for civilization, it connotes an advanced stage of social development. *Polite* describes someone with good manners at all times, someone who always follows the rules for proper behavior. *Courteous* adds to polite the idea of showing thoughtful or considerate attention to the feelings and wishes of others. *Civil* connotes being just polite enough not to be rude, and therefore, *civility* in this editorial will refer to behavior somewhat less than polite or courteous, thereby setting the social behavior threshold somewhat lower in terms of what one might expect would be requisite for mutually beneficial social actions with other people in one's work environment.

Civil behavior increases social capital, which is the fountainhead of interpersonal trust, sense of obligation, strength of norms, and unrestrained informational pathways that accrue from robust relationships among members of a community. Social capital produces communities of cooperation, fosters communication, enhances achievement of common goals, and facilitates successful realization of complex and dynamic relationships.

According to former Iowa Congressman (and current head of the National Endowment for the Humanities) Jim Leach, "The times require a new social compact rooted in mutual respect and citizen trust. At its core, civility requires respectful engagement: a willingness to consider other views and place them in the context of history and life experiences." Incendiary words matter, and labeling a political foe as a "socialist, liberal or left winger," or "conservative or right winger," is not an argument, but rather a label that serves as an inadequate and inappropriate substitute for thought. Leach states that the words we use can "clarify or cloud thought and energize action, sometimes bringing out the better angels of our nature, sometimes baser instincts. When coupled with character assassination, polarizing rhetoric can exacerbate intolerance and perhaps impel violence." Moreover, reporter Mark Bernstein<sup>2</sup> comments that this approach to politics results in an "insidious ... tactical refusal to engage those with differing opinions in a search for the common good." Indeed, civility should not be incompatible with partisanship. He further reports that our current two-party system "seems to exist in different worlds." For example, he cites that each federal legislator receives closed-circuit television feeds of the proceedings on the floor of Congress from their own caucus, the practical result being that they are not viewing the same debate!

Daily, Americans are barraged by a system of balkanizing, foment-goading media and communication vehicles that tend to promote and heighten intolerance of differences of opinion rather than serving to catalyze informed, reasoned and civil discourse. You always can locate only the news that you want to hear (as an example, Fox News or MSNBC), news that reinforces your own system of beliefs rather than educating you about the thoughts of others. Our politicians, no less our citizens, should be *listening* with respectful consideration to the possibilities of the viewpoints raised by those with whom we know we disagree, even on a visceral level. Politicians should be ethically bound to seek the pathways of compromise—perhaps even arriving at a consensus—rather than those of divisiveness and vilification, lest our country suffer even further indignities.

As anesthesiologists, we know full well that *incivility* does rarely rear its ugly head in the medical workplace in the guise of the abusive and/or disruptive physician. *Abusive* behavior is characterized by the treatment of others harshly, cruelly and unremorsefully, while *disruptive* behavior is the moniker for interference with the integrity and continuity of functions necessary for the provision of quality of care. The importance of *respect and civility* in promoting good patient care is a foundation of the American Medical Association's *Code of Medical Ethics* and the American Society of Anesthesiologists *Guidelines for the Ethical Practice of Anesthesiology*. Of course, room must be preserved for the appropriate and civil use of "innovative disruption"; that is, the deployment of disruption as a means of pursuing improvement, where there is a role for the maturation of new ideas to replace those that previously have not been productive. Uncivil behavior subverts the ethical obligation of healthcare professionals to consistently place the interests of their patients foremost because it interferes with the normative processes of collegiality, cooperation, communication and teamwork. *Incivility* sabotages the viability of an effective and efficient institutional culture of safety and quality care.

The elimination of abusive and disruptive behavior in politics, just as in medicine,<sup>3</sup> should be pursued vigorously. Without a wellspring of civility, the "well-being" of our great democracy is in jeopardy.

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<sup>1</sup> Ron Chernow: The Feuding Fathers. *Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Bernstein: Uncivil Society. *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, June 2, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to appreciate that physicians may participate in business arrangements that hospitals might view as unfair or unwanted competition, and such professional competition and animosity has, on occasion, created incentives for hospital administrators to use the disruptive/abusive label inappropriately in a ruse to try to remove such competitors from the medical staff. Physicians should not be labeled as abusive and/or disruptive if they violate onerous, overly broad or sham "codes of conduct" that are created to *quelch medical advocacy*, target competitors, or otherwise have no nexus to improving patient care.