How to Win a Battle against the NBME

By Solomon Yilma

As some of you may be aware, I was involved in a 13-month long fight against the National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME) trying to get testing accommodations for USMLE step 2 after undergoing major brain surgery in January 2009. The process involved submitting various documents such as neuropsychological testing results and letters/evaluations by various physicians. In fact, over the 13 month period I submitted the initial request for accommodation followed by appeals that encompassed letters and/or evaluations from three neurologists, one psychiatrist, three separate neuropsychological testing results, letters from clinical faculty that had observed me during my clinical clerkships, my entire medical record since being diagnosed with a brain tumor, my entire medical school academic record and the recommendations of the Carver College of Medicine Accommodation Committee.

I am happy to say that in early November of 2010, I finally prevailed in the fight against the NBME after hiring an educational attorney who had previously argued cases against the NBME on behalf of medical students who were requesting testing accommodations for USMLE. In addition to submitting an overwhelming amount of documentation with the appeal that finally prevailed, the attorney also wrote a seven page cover letter that outlined the relevant Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines that the NBME is required to abide by and listed previous rulings that established precedent on how the guidelines are supposed to be interpreted. The attorney gave the NBME only 1 week (instead of the customary 6 to 8 weeks they ask of applicants who file an appeal) to respond to his letter and demands. It was all amazing! It took just a few days for the NBME house counsel and their ADA compliance officer, who had been rejecting all of my previous appeals, to respond with a statement that they have agreed to all of the demands and will follow the recommendations of the Carver College of Medicine Accommodations Committee.

This was a major victory that happened almost too quickly against a group that is notorious for not conceding so readily. The main differences between this appeal and previous appeals was the involvement of the attorney and the fact that my attorney submitted copies of the appeal directly to the NBME house counsel instead of submitting them only to their ADA compliance officer (like I had been doing while filing previous appeals). That left me with the impression that I could have saved myself 13 months of hassle and delays if I had the foresight to hire an educational attorney right off the bat.

I guess the moral of this story is that you should always consult an attorney if you are requesting testing accommodations for USMLE under the current ADA guidelines because you will likely get the runaround if someone very familiar with the guidelines is not looking out for your interest.

This Issue:
Solomon Yilma
Poetry by
Gregory Larrieux
Chelsy Kemmet
Walking Through a Gauntlet of Cigarette Smoke

By Solomon Yilma

I am sure that everyone has heard of the UIHC campus policy that enforces the smoke-free hospital environment by prohibiting smoking on any and all areas that are maintained by UIHC. Like most people, I thought that this policy was a move in the right direction since I have always found it humorous and somewhat hypocritical to see healthcare workers smoking right next to patients who are being treated for smoking related health problems.

Lately, however, I have started to wonder if this policy was well thought through before it was implemented. I make this statement because I have noticed that my unwilling exposure to second-hand smoke has significantly increased since the implementation of this policy.

I live in an apartment located right across from the College of Dentistry. Therefore, every day on my way to MERF or UIHC (and on the way back to my apartment at the end of the day), I have to be exposed to smoke from the numerous individuals who are lined up to take their cigarette break. This is a very unpleasant experience since I am rather sensitive to cigarette smoke as well as certain types of odors as a side effect of my recent brain surgery. So each time I approach the stretch of sidewalk located between the College of Dentistry and the VA Loop I have to hold my breath like an Olympic swimmer and try to walk as fast as I can through the gauntlet of cigarette smoke that is lingering over the sidewalk. Unfortunately, this approach only works some of the time. Based on how far apart the smokers are standing, I often find myself running out of breath and having to take a quick breath, only to take in second-hand smoke instead of fresh air. Yet, on other occasions, I am greeted by the distinct smell of Marlboros before I even come close to the smoker because the wind suddenly shifted direction.

From my point of view, this whole arrangement sucks. I am a nonsmoker and I have never smoked cigarettes in my life. I just went through the emotional experience of having a large mass cut out of my brain after learning that I had developed a brain tumor despite the fact that I never smoked, did any drugs, or drank the copious amounts of alcohol that most college students or my fellow medical students may drink. I did my best to lead a clean life to the best of my ability and I am currently trying to limit my exposure to carcinogens as much as I can. So, I am very annoyed by the fact that I have to inhale cigarette smoke on a regular basis due to a policy that pushed the smokers out of the hospital and into my daily path. Frankly, I did not have a problem with the “smoking huts” that were previously used to designate the smoking areas and corral the smokers into an enclosure during their smoking breaks. At least then I did not have to worry about being blindsided by cigarette smoke just because the wind shifted direction.

Chemical Attraction

Greg Larrieux

I know this isn’t proper scientific protocol, but
I’ve been scoping you through my lens for a while
And I was wondering if I could double helix
Around the curves of your organic structure

Because honestly the sight of your cytosine
Has my guanine wanting to bond
Please excuse the crude reference to your
Deoxyribonucleic acidic composition
It’s just that your chemical attraction renders me inarticulate

I can’t help wanting to take you on a Petri dish
And turn on the metaphorical heat lamp
Get acquainted with your double X gene
ics
And snap off those hydrogen bonds...
Sometimes you make me want to replicate

Quite frankly, I find you phenotypically fantastic
And I promise to love each and every one of your amino acids
If you let me be the catalyst to set off your chain reactions
Because with all this chemical attraction
I’m only trying to make magic
McCowen Community Supports Local Family
By Chelsy Kemmet

Each holiday season the McCowen community at the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine adopts a local family in need, and this holiday season was no different! Our fundraising efforts began in the fall with the “Mr. Iowa Medicine” competition, where six of Carver’s finest men provided the college with an hour of true entertainment. Votes for the winner were cast via generous fiscal donations, all of which went towards our family. These kind gifts totaled to over $300. Iowa City Businesses also contributed by donating over $350 worth of merchandise for our family. In late December we had the opportunity to help make our Adopt-A-Family’s Christmas a truly memorable holiday. We would like to express our gratitude to the many generous people who helped make this event possible.

Submit your work to Vital Signs!
“What can I submit to Vital Signs?”
Photography, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, art, rants—anything you use to express yourself!

“Okay, but how do I submit these for publication?”
Email one of our friendly editors:
Stephanie Lichtor [stephanie-lichtor@uiowa.edu]
Solomon Yilma [solomon-yilma@uiowa.edu]
Mattie Oelschlaeger [martha-oelschlaeger@uiowa.edu]
Denny Porto [dennis-porto@uiowa.edu]

“But what should I write about?”
Write about your vacation, service trip, research—or anything else;
Include pictures if you can!

“I want to be an editor just like you!”
Email an editor; we are always looking for new talent.
Come out and run with us around the health sciences campus in Iowa City! All proceeds benefit the Iowa City Free Medical Clinic and College of Medicine Mobile Clinic!

Race Fees:
(Includes registration, T-shirt, and race number. Subtract $5 with no T-shirt)

$20 for online early registration prior to March 2, 2010
$25 for online registration following March 2
$30 for on-site registration on April 2

For more information and registration, check out our facebook page or contact us at UILDocDash@gmail.com

All participants of legal age will be required to sign a waiver for race participation either at time of registration or at time of race. Individuals with disabilities are encouraged to attend all University of Iowa-sponsored events. If you are a person with a disability who requires an accommodation in order to participate in this program, please contact Heather Kruse in advance at UILDocDash@gmail.com