

Muhammad Ali as the Face of Parkinson's

Diseases, like great causes, need high-profile celebrity advocates to raise awareness. Those of us affected by Parkinson's disease — be it as a patient or a family caregiver — are grateful that Muhammad Ali's children finally went public with details of their father's illness, and have not kept him out of the public eye. However, despite lending his name to the Muhammad Ali Parkinson Center and serving as an ambassador for Parkinson's causes, your March/April 2006 cover story poignantly revealed how the sports legend can no longer speak for himself — or for fellow Parkinson's patients.

In this age of "charitainment," Parkinson's needs fresh blood to take up the fight and make the disease better understood. It is not a "sexy" cause; we fear it, we fear that we may be among the 1 in 100 people in their "golden years" who contract the disease. Though it can be crippling or disabling, early symptoms can be so subtle and gradual that they're sometimes ignored or attributed to the effects of aging: Perhaps every fourth person I come across will volunteer, out of solidarity, that their father or grandmother had Parkinson's, for it had manifested itself only through minor tremors or other relatively innocuous symptoms.

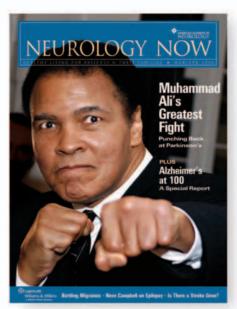
Muhammad Ali's unique case forms the public perception of what the disease does to people: greatly reducing the speed of the thought process, slurring speech, severely limiting movement. Parkinson's is a uniquely individual disease, which manifests itself in many forms: physical, mental, and emotional.

In that regard, it was extremely educational to read about Ali the man and Ali the patient, rather than Ali the symbol.

Brian Kenety Prague, Czech Republic

Linking Head Trauma to Parkinsonism

Like most people, I had always assumed Muhammed Ali's condition



was purely "pugilistic parkinsonism" an obvious result of a lifetime's blows to the head, particularly those taken during his later "rope-a-dope" period. After reading Dr. Stanley Fahn's speculation that Ali might have developed classic Parkinson's disease even if he had chosen, say, public accounting over the fight game as a career, I was skeptical at first. But then I thought back to the role that trauma had played in the progression of the disease in my own father. He was first diagnosed with Parkinson's after undergoing minor surgery for a hernia, but my family and I then realized there had been mild evidence of the condition for at least the prior two years; the surgery had somehow accelerated the development of symptoms. The degeneration was further quickened seven years later when he suffered head trauma from a fall; after that, he required home care.

Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that Ali was diagnosed at such a young age: Only two traumas revealed and subsequently accelerated my father's parkinsonism — while for Ali, head trauma was a day at the office.

Michael Keller Hollis Hills, N.Y.

Another Private Look at the Most Public Figure

I have been a fan of your publication from the beginning, but you have truly outdone yourself with the March/April issue. I have known Muhammad Ali in passing. Once I had dinner with a small group including Muhammad at the Watergate in Washington. We were there to testify before a congressional committee. During the dinner, the champ disappeared: he was in the kitchen visiting with the help. An experience I will never forget.

Jim Maurer Hull, Mass.

Looking for Answers to Battle Migraines

I just wanted to thank you for the article entitled "Battling Migraine Attacks" [THERAPY WATCH, March/April 2006]. While I realize the focus of your magazine is not usually on migraines, as a sufferer of some seriously devastating migraines, I really appreciated the attention this article gave. People who get frequent debilitating migraines live in this scary state of anticipation of the next migraine at all times. It's even tougher for those of us who do not respond to typical meds. Thankfully, I have a great neurologist who prescribed a medication which has helped greatly. Thank you again for your high-quality magazine and the great migraine article.

Amanda Simjian Torrington, Conn.

We welcome your letters. E-mail them to neurologynow@lwwny.com or fax them to 646-674-6500. Include the writer's full name, address and phone number. Letters may be edited for space and clarity.

We also welcome your personal essays. The SPEAK UP essay is a forum for people who live with neurological conditions and those who care for them. Please keep your submissions to 600 words.