

## Alex Lehn, MD interviews incoming FNDS President, Barbara Dworetzky, MD

*Interview with Barabara Dworetzky, MD*

*By Alexander C. Lehn, MD*

### **Tell us about yourself. Where are you from? What is your background? Where do you live/work?**

I grew up in New York, in a town called Edgemont, about 45 minutes north of the city. I went to college at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, where I received a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology, and then moved to Boston to do clinical research at the Boston VA Aphasia Research Center running a laboratory for one of my former professors, Dr. Sheila Blumstein. She taught courses in psycholinguistics and aphasia and was a leading academic on brain and language. I tested Veterans with neurological disorders affecting their language function (e.g. strokes, traumatic brain injuries, tumors) and became fascinated by listening to Norman Geschwind, Michael Alexander, Harold Goodglass, and Edith Kaplan discuss clinical cases on the wards and at grand rounds learning about what can happen to make our brains, our personhood, be challenged. I decided to go back to school to become a neurologist and chose to matriculate at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx, NY where Dominick Purpura, a well-known neuroscientist and neurologist was the Dean of the medical school. At one of the earliest lectures I can recall, Dr. Purpura mimicked a seizure with a clear Jacksonian march. I was completely mesmerized and thought there was nothing cooler than neurology. I moved back to Boston for residency at the Harvard Longwood Neurology program, known for its strength in neurobehavior which is what I thought I would focus on with my earlier background. As it turns out, I would become an epileptologist because everyone was afraid of seizures, and I do like a challenge -- to take something difficult and be able to master it.



I do not come from a medical family. I am the first physician in my family. My father took over a small wholesale hardware business in the Bronx that my grandfather started after he emigrated to New York from eastern Europe, what is now Belarus. My older brother now runs the business. I live in Boston and work at the Brigham and Women's Hospital, a major Harvard Medical School affiliate, and part of the Mass General Brigham (MGB). I have been at the Brigham for over 30 years, the last 15 as Chief of the Division of Epilepsy. I succeeded my mentor, Edward Bromfield, the former chief, after he passed away in 2009.

### **How did you become interested in Functional Neurological Disorders? What other areas of neurology and/or medicine are you interested in?**

As an epilepsy fellow, you become fascinated by all types of seizures. I trained at a time when the understanding of FND was low, and I was taught incorrectly that most patients with epilepsy also have nonepileptic seizures. The only research for decades on this topic was how to distinguish the semiology from

epileptic seizures and send patients away from the neurologist. My first job after completing my epilepsy fellowship was at the Boston VA where I had been a research assistant more than a decade earlier. At the VA, I saw many male Veterans in the seizure clinic who did not have epilepsy, and one of my earliest papers was on psychogenic nonepileptic seizures (what we were taught to call them) in men. The VA had a large research program to study PTSD, and I was trying to figure out how to combine my epilepsy training with academics while doing many administrative tasks in several very disparate programs that I was asked to lead (women's neurology, medical student clerkship director, EEG lab director, aphasia grand rounds). I was puzzled about the men with FND since, at the Brigham, nearly all the patients with FND were women. I may not have consciously realized it at the time, but my psychology/cognitive science background and clinical epilepsy fellowship training interests gelled, and I found an area that both fascinated me and begged for further understanding. Dr. Bromfield then invited me back to the Brigham to help me grow the program, and for me to be able to focus on seizures and academics.

**What are your interests outside of work? What do you spend your time with when you are not at work?**

I love growing vegetables and herbs, and have a large garden in the Berkshires (between Boston and NY) where my parents have had a property since I was 9 years old. I love to cook and eat fresh food from the garden and love being outdoors. I also took some adult education classes in upholstery and have created some interesting blends of modern material on old furniture that others have discarded. I now truly appreciate why upholstery is so expensive, it is indeed hard physical work. A nice antidote to academic work.

I made one interesting chair. I had found a chair that was discarded in the city as we were heading to my son's concert and we grabbed it. My husband helped strip off the old material. I selected some modern material and turned it into a kind of old piece with a modern look. I love creating things that are new and interesting. That is another reason why I like to be part of FND efforts: working towards rebuilding some old stuff, to make it new and better. In the case of FND, we got it very wrong, and finally there is a group of passionate and brilliant people interested in understanding this complex disorder.

**We are all looking forward to the FNDS meeting in Verona. What are you looking forward to? Are there any sessions in which you are particularly interested?**

I'm very excited about the upcoming FNDS meeting in Verona. I really like to think about how we can just do better as physicians, communicate better and have better outcomes for patients as there is so much suffering with this disorder. The parts of the meeting that I'm particularly interested in are how to reduce treatment barriers (Kasia Kozłowska's talk). I'm really interested in hearing about how our primary care and general practitioner colleagues are challenged and can help in identifying and managing FND, because they're on the front lines with patients.

I'm also looking forward to the case presentations at the end of the day that ties together topics that were presented. Integrating all of the team members essential to care will be demonstrated, which is ultimately what we need to do for patients and ourselves.

**The society has developed so much since its early days and together we have achieved a lot over the last few years. What are your goals for the society during your time as the President? What are you looking forward to? What do you want to achieve? Any concerns or worries?**

I would love to get more epileptologists interested in FND. As you know roughly 20- 40% of patients who come to our monitoring units don't have epilepsy. These patients need help as early as possible to get a good outcome. At the end of the day, that is what every patient wants and what they deserve. They want to feel better, they want to be heard. They don't want to be told "you're doing this on purpose" or "we can't help you". Or having every clinician calling it something different and being awkward with discussing how to get better. Every clinician needs to know what to do to help patients. I have some ideas how to achieve this and plan to network at the meeting with anyone interested in helping with the FND Society.

What are my concerns? As you know, FNDS is a very young society. There's a lot of headwinds in medicine, especially academic medicine. There are politics, as well, and financial concerns. We are an international society, with very multidisciplinary members, and we need to be very mindful of what are our members want to know about and what they need to know about. How can we fund a medical society when there are no medications for the disorder? Pharma helps all the other societies stay solvent. We have opportunities to grow our membership and provide education to improve our medical system. We need to include as many people and help increase interest in FND which will help patients, clinicians, and the medical system. It's a big task, and a very exciting one.