

## 2009 Roatch Lecture Response Summary

Sam W. Downing, M.D.

Guillaume Filhon provided a very thought provoking, stimulating and challenging presentation on France's efforts to provide "security" to its citizenry. Components of security certainly include a sense of trust, a sense of safety, freedom from worry about one's future, and prevention of and relief from suffering, whether it be physical, mental or spiritual. Here in the United States, one must ask just how "secure" do we American citizens feel, and are we making progress toward feeling more or less secure as time goes by?

As human beings age, we usually become more vulnerable, and often times return to more dependent status as our physical and cognitive capacities decline. Our worldwide demographic shift toward an aging population demands that we pay attention to the increasing needs for social support as we age. Family responsibility for elder care is often a hit-or-miss understanding, as is personal responsibility for one's own health and retirement provision. Although most of us in the United States would identify quality healthcare as a "right", our current system is structured to support this right only through our over-burdened, expensive emergency room option. For the millions of uninsured Americans, their risk of increased vulnerability and economic disaster is a daily reality.

Both France and the United States recognize the future challenge of supporting an aging population. How will our systems be sustained as fewer workers are asked to support more elders? As our health status leads to longer life spans, how should this impact our expectations for maintaining employment in later years, to help offset the growing burden? Can continuing economic productivity as we age potentially add to the meaning and value of our individual stories in our final chapters?

Technological advances in medicine continue to amaze and impress us here in the United States as well as our foreign observers, but it is clear that more dollars spent on healthcare does not directly correlate with increased quality, or improvements in health the way we currently measure it. We can spend as much as we like on health care and social security, but should we also be more demanding in the quality of the product we are purchasing? So the challenge appears to be in using our technology wisely, efficiently, and with a keen eye toward recognition of

when palliative approaches are more appropriate than aggressive, life sustaining efforts. In a world of dwindling resources, growing populations and cutting edge medical treatments, our challenge will lie in finding equitable, rational and malleable programs to provide that sense of "security" that we can all appreciate and desire.