

# UNM panelists seek better definition of 'quality of life'

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"All I want is for someone to take me fishing."

That was the message a disabled man in Socorro once gave to Anthony Cahill, a scholar seeking to define "quality of life."

Cahill, the director of the Division of Disability and Health Policy at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine, said it was back in 1997. He was looking for a more meaningful definition than the so-called healthy days index usually used to define quality of life.

Cahill was one of four panelists looking at the quality of life for people with brain and behavioral health conditions Friday during Neuroscience Day 2014, part of a celebration of Brain Awareness Week at the Domenici Center for Health Sciences Education.

Another panelist, Katie Bartram, listed three aspects that define the quality of her multiple sclerosis-riven life: psychological, physical and emotional. The intelligent, witty, attractive young woman with myriad problems can easily relate to either definition. For her, the healthy days index – "In the past 30 days ..." – is obvious. "I'm sick," she said. "I know I'm a hassle. ... It's really, really hard to watch your body give out on you."

She, too, would like someone to take her fishing. "I'm tired of being so misunderstood by my loved ones," she told the audience of about 75, many of whom have their own health demons to contend with.

Another UNM researcher, Deborah Helitzer, a professor in the Department of Family and Community Medicine, addressed a different issue: child abuse. She said there is no doubt that it casts a permanent shadow over the length of a victim's lifetime, but added that there tend to be two reactions at the opposite ends of a spectrum.

On one hand, some victims report, "It ruined my life." On the other hand, the thought is, "It made me stronger."

To date, Helitzer said, the medical research community has few answers. Is it a trait that determines the reaction, something in their chemistry?

"We just don't know," she said, noting that 70 percent of adults have had "adverse childhood experiences."

The final panelist, Professor Davin Quinn, a medical doctor whose field of expertise is traumatic brain injury, said the problem is particularly acute in New Mexico for a number of reasons: horrible traffic accidents, a high rate of alcoholism, the difficulty of obtaining care.

Having someone in your life who cares is "unbelievably important," he said, adding that those without that someone who cares "do very poorly."

The afternoon panel was one of three: The others were the "Promise and Perils of Stem Cell Research in Brain and Behavioral Health" and "How Do We Get From Basic Science to Treatment?"