

# Relentless Commitment— *What it Means to be a Health Care Provider*

by **Russ Bodoff**

NHIA President & Chief Executive Officer

Usually, I concentrate my column on current, important developments, challenges or opportunities in the home infusion field, matters impacting the patients you care for, or activities transpiring in Washington. The words that so often get printed on this page are typically geared towards calling our collective attention to some matter we all need to collaborate around or focus on, so as to ultimately, positively impact the lives of patients being served. The approach for this column will be much different. I want to tell you a story—the inspirational story of Tadeusz Pankiewicz, a pharmacist who I became familiar with on a recent trip to Poland. Yes, the subject matter I am writing about today will be uniquely different from the typical content I cover—but in the end, this column will still be an attempt to affirm for us all that your daily commitment to advancing the quality of life and care for your patients is the highest of professional—and personal—callings.



Let me begin. In World War II, during the Nazi occupation of Poland, a ghetto was closed off for the Kraków Jewish population. Among the four pharmacies owned by non-Jews in that area, Mr. Pankiewicz was the only proprietor that refused to relocate out of the ghetto. While it was an offense punishable by death to provide any help to the Jewish population, this pharmacist—moved by compassion to challenge the injustices emerging around him and by a sense of relentless commitment to serve those in need—convinced the Nazi authorities that if he didn't stay open and provide medications to the ghetto inhabitants, disease would run rampant and the Nazi guards would then be at risk. Somehow his savvy logic, amid the face of murderous rage, was amazingly enough to allow him to keep his pharmacy doors, *and location*, open.



*A photo of Tadeusz Pankiewicz (center) and his staff, taken inside his Kraków pharmacy in 1940.*

Then, as conditions in the ghetto degenerated, Pankiewicz and his staff offered not only a place to obtain medical assistance free of charge, but also a trusted location for people to meet, exchange information and even hide. Despite the daily risks to their own lives, they carried messages and items to pawn for the Jewish prisoners; brought news, food and money from the outside; and facilitated the procurement of false documents to help people escape. Pankiewicz provided sedatives for children who were being hidden from the Nazi soldiers and hair dye for the older people of the ghetto (as this more “youthful look” sometimes enabled such individuals to avoid deportation to the death camps). Finally, in the last, tragic days of the ghetto, Mr. Pankiewicz and his staff were on hand to distribute medicines and dressings amongst the population of the ghetto.

When the war ended, Pankiewicz continued to work at his pharmacy until 1953. In 1947, he published a book, *The Kraków Ghetto Pharmacy*, to help assure that the horror of the ghetto

would not be forgotten. After providing a lifetime of care and service, Pankiewicz died in 1993—and his pharmacy has recently been made into a museum. What a man he was, and what a profound difference he made in the lives of those around him, despite the challenges before him.

This story meant a lot to me personally and professionally, for many reasons. Even as I reflect now upon all that transpired, I am in awe at how this fairly unknown pharmacist and his staff all demonstrated such relentless commitment, ingenuity and passion for their patients. For to me, they represent what I see every day in the dedicated professionals who make up the NHIA membership—a *total commitment to their patients' care and quality of life*. At a time when you are all facing challenges and uncertainties related to health care reform, reimbursement cutbacks and, frankly, a lack of recognition by key government officials of what it takes to actually provide such a high level of patient care, I thought this remarkable story would be important to share with you—it's an affirmation that, despite any challenges which may arise, what you do is incredibly important. *We are not just in the business of health care, we are in the business of people's lives.*

On those difficult and stressful days, should you ever question if what you do is worthwhile, I hope you always remember the positive impact you and your team have on your patients' lives. I certainly recognize that fact daily—and for that, I am especially proud to be the CEO of your association.

Regards,

