

Dr. Richard Pellegrino of Hot Springs has a big personality, and he's using it to achieve a big goal. The energetic, funny and outgoing neurologist has put his medical mind to work on movie making and mystery writing, all for the cause of promoting an understanding of multiple sclerosis.

Pellegrino's film, "Taking Back the Future: Living With MS," drew 700 people when it was shown at the Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival this fall and earned a review in the Oct. 9 issue of *The Lancet*, the British medical journal. He'll show the film and give a talk at 6 p.m. Friday, Nov. 19, at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences.

The documentary and the thriller, "Point Source," whose heroine is a Hot Springs neurologist with an Italian name and lots of MS patients, were conceived two years ago by Pellegrino, who wanted to create a "media voice" for MS patients. The documentary is not a "motivational film," Pellegrino said, nor is it a film about heroic achievements of people with MS. Instead, it's about what living with MS is like — information that families and friends can use to help

laughs and says, "Yeah, and if you don't like it I'm going to send Bruno out after you.") The staged segments are a device to offer facts, in a conversational manner, about how MS is diagnosed, advances in medication during the past two decades, what financial and emotional difficulties may arise.

Movies don't do it for everyone, of course. Su Jolley, a patient of Pellegrino's from North Little Rock, said the neurologist called her at 10 p.m. one night to tell her he wanted to make a documentary and ask what she thought. "I said it sounds boring to me," Jolley said. But "Point Source" was different. "I couldn't put it down."

Jolley has worked with Pellegrino since that call, asking MS patients to write about their lives and how they'd solved problems on Pellegrino's website,

www.yourmovieproject.com

Pellegrino said he took his "cues" from MS sufferers in the creation of the film and the book.

Pellegrino's alter ego — Angela Donatelli, a Hot Springs neurologist who treats a large number of MS patients — is the heroine of "Point Source," which revolves around an epidemic of MS in a small town in the Ouachitas. There's a love interest, a wise mentor, feisty older women who lead bullies from the FBI astray, Korean terrorists and, of course, facts about multiple sclerosis sprinkled throughout. The book is well crafted and suspenseful, even if the characters occasionally drift into cliches (they do a lot of "soft chuckling"). Pellegrino credits editor Nancy Gratton for the book's flow.

Jolley, supportive of the

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book project even when friends with MS told her they couldn't see anything "thrilling" about the disease, knows there's a need to inform the public about MS.

"Eight times out of 10, when I tell someone I have MS, they say, 'I'm so sorry.' I could just whack them ... I don't need to hear that," Jolley said. She believes in fighting all the way, by staying active and positive.

MS' "silent symptoms" — excruciating muscle cramps and debilitating fatigue — can make its victims look like slackers to those who don't understand the disease process.

"I have a friend who's a doctor," Pellegrino said. "I'm in a party with him at his house and he's talking to me and he says, 'Excuse me a second, but I have to hit the floor.' " He meant it literally; the drain of MS is profound. "It made an impression on me," Pellegrino said.

A Bronx-born physician with degrees from Albert Einstein and Columbia universities in New York, Pellegrino runs a research center at St. Joseph's Mercy Hospital, where he runs clinical trials on drugs. He wants his self-published book and film to undergo double-blind trials, too, as if they were medicines. He and Dr. Michael Cody of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Southern Cali-

fornia are putting together a test that will send the book and film to 26 sites around the country; the test will compare patient-family reaction to the book as compared with informational handouts.

He's also hoping to work with Chuck Anderson, a professor of rhetoric and writing at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock who's interested in what's called "narrative medicine" — the theory that the way people structure their stories when they talk about their illnesses has particular meaning. Pellegrino would offer the hundreds of letters he's received from MS patients to Anderson for his analysis.

Pellegrino's interest, he said, is not so much in teaching the science of MS, whose cause remains unknown, as in addressing the "human side of the illness."

"Point Source" will have a sequel, Pellegrino said, about a man (named Dante, from Italy) who perverts clinical trials for his own ends. While thrilling the reader, it should also impart some information about ethics and human drug testing. Cancer patients will be asked to write Pellegrino, as MS patients were.

Jolley has one complaint about "Point Source." "The girl didn't get the sheriff," she said. Perhaps successive "Dr. Donatelli" thrillers will.

Pellegrino's talk and film Friday will be presented in the Sam Walton Auditorium on the 10th floor of the Arkansas Cancer Research Center.