DYSTONIA

TYPE Special Issue Editorial
PUBLISHED 13 November 2026
DOI 10.3389/dyst.2026.18143

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OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY
Dystonia Editorial Office,
Frontiers Media SA, Switzerland

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RECEIVED 03 November 2026
ACCEPTED 03 November 2026
PUBLISHED 13 November 2026

CITATION
Shaikh AG, Sillitoe RV and Teller JK (2026) Editorial: Emerging leaders in dystonia research.
Dystonia 5:18143.
doi: 10.3389/dyst.2026.18143

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Editorial: Emerging leaders in dystonia research

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KEYWORDS
dystonia, early-career training, fellowship, mentorship, philanthropy

Editorial on the Special Issue
Emerging leaders in dystonia research

Introduction

A field is transformed not only by the discoveries it makes, but by the people it dares to believe in before those discoveries are possible. At a moment when a young clinician is deciding whether to devote a career to dystonia, or a promising scientist is considering whether to pursue a difficult question about neural circuits, a fellowship can change the trajectory of a life. Multiply that moment across years, institutions, and generations. Philanthropy becomes something more consequential than financial assistance: it becomes the architecture of a scientific field. This is the extraordinary promise of the Dystonia Medical Research Foundation (DMRF).

We write with gratitude for the patients and families whose determination has kept dystonia visible; for the donors who have entrusted their resources to a future they may never personally witness; for mentors who have opened their laboratories and clinics; and for trainees who have accepted the challenge of studying a disorder that still holds so many unanswered questions. This shared commitment has helped turn dystonia from an overlooked clinical problem into a vigorous and increasingly connected area of modern neuroscience.

Why the field needed champions

Dystonia can emerge at any age, affect a single or multiple body regions, and triggered through genetic, acquired, or degenerative processes. It may appear in isolation or accompany complex syndromes. No single laboratory, technique, or specialty can own the solution. Dystonia needs the clinician who recognizes subtle phenomenology, the geneticist who discovers a causal variant, the physiologist who deciphers a circuit, the engineer who builds a new therapeutic tool, and the implementation scientist who brings discoveries back to patients. The DMRF has recognized this essential truth: one must invest in a diverse community of people to advance a complex disorder.

Beyond the fellowship: a legacy of scientific leadership and discovery

The enduring impact of the DMRF's fellowship program is perhaps best appreciated not by counting the awards it has made, but by considering the generations of investigators it has helped inspire. Over the last 20 years, the Foundation has supported more than 60 promising clinical and research fellows, investing in individuals at a formative stage of their careers when encouragement, mentorship, and opportunity can fundamentally shape their professional trajectories. Many have continued along academic and scientific paths, contributing to a growing community of clinicians, neuroscientists, and innovators whose collective work is advancing our understanding of dystonia and related neurological disorders.

What makes this investment particularly remarkable is its reach beyond the individual fellow. By supporting training at institutions across the globe, the DMRF has helped cultivate an interconnected community of scientific talent. Each fellow carries forward not only newly acquired expertise but also intellectual curiosity, collaborative relationships, and commitment to discovery fostered during training. As these investigators establish their own scientific identities, develop research programs, build specialized clinical services, and mentor subsequent generations, the influence of the original investment has the potential to multiply. A fellowship awarded to one promising investigator can ultimately touch the careers of many others and, through advances in knowledge and care, the lives of patients whom the Foundation may never directly encounter.

The scholarly contributions of this community offer a glimpse of that expanding influence. Across the fellowship alumni, historical bibliometric records reflect a substantial body of scientific activity, with more than 1600 scientific peer-reviewed papers over last 15 years to neuroscience and clinical medicine. Yet publications, grants, and academic appointments, important as they are, capture only part of the story. The deeper impact lies in the questions these investigators have learned to ask, the scientific boundaries they are willing to challenge, and the bridges they build between molecular discovery, neural circuit physiology, and clinical care. Their collective efforts help move dystonia from a relatively specialized area of neurological investigation toward a more integrated and dynamic field of translational neuroscience.

Perhaps the most compelling legacy of the DMRF is that it has helped create something far more enduring than a portfolio of funded projects: a community of investigators equipped and motivated to carry the field forward.

A message to the next-generation: this field needs you

To trainees considering a career in dystonia: do not mistake complexity for a reason to turn away. Complexity is the opportunity. The next era of dystonia research will be shaped by investigators who cross boundaries; between genetics and circuits, physiology and computation, clinical observation and engineering, mechanistic discovery and patient-centered outcomes. Bring ambitious questions. Seek mentors who will challenge you. Apply for fellowship support with confidence and imagination. Dystonia needs not only established experts, but bold early-career minds willing to redefine what is possible.

To mentors: identify talent early, including people who may not yet see dystonia as their professional home. Invite them into your clinics, laboratories, and collaborations. Encourage them to apply, help them formulate questions worthy of a career, and provide the protected time, rigorous feedback, and advocacy that turn promise into independence. A fellowship award is most powerful when paired with mentorship that continues long after the funding period ends. The next-generation of dystonia leaders is already in our training programs; our responsibility is to recognize and cultivate them.

A message to donors: the next discovery begins with an opportunity

To philanthropic partners, the fellowship program offers a particularly compelling form of investment. A gift to early-career training does not merely purchase research tools or support a year of salary. It can give a gifted investigator the opportunity to enter the field, acquire rare expertise, and pursue questions that would otherwise remain unanswered. The ultimate dividend may emerge years later, in a new diagnostic insight, a collaborative trial, a better treatment, a more accessible clinic, or a new generation of investigators trained by the original fellow. These returns cannot be promised in advance; it makes work possible whose full value has not yet been imagined. That is precisely why visionary philanthropy matters.

The Foundation's work also reminds us that generosity is a collective achievement. The donor who contributes, the family that advocates, the mentor who teaches, the institution that provides infrastructure, and the fellow who perseveres are partners in the same enterprise. We owe each of them not only gratitude but a commitment to expand the opportunity they have created.

The next chapter is ours to write

The field is ready for an even more ambitious fellowship era: broader outreach to outstanding applicants, deliberate pairing of basic scientists and clinicians, international and interdisciplinary mentorship, opportunities for alumni collaboration, and sustained tracking of the careers and patient-centered contributions that follow. An alumni network could become a living platform for shared methods, multicenter studies, scientific exchange, and mentoring across generations. Such initiatives would extend the DMRF's reach from supporting individual trainees to actively connecting the people who will solve dystonia's hardest problems.

We should therefore regard the DMRF fellowship program not as a peripheral philanthropic activity, but as one of the field's engines of renewal. Its influence lies in the investigators it has nurtured, the questions it has enabled, the collaborations it has seeded, and the possibilities it continues to open for patients and families. To the trainees: apply. To the mentors: recruit, encourage, and invest your time. To the donors: continue to believe in people before their discoveries are visible. And to the DMRF and its community: thank

you for showing that the future of dystonia is built, one opportunity and one investigator at a time.

Author contributions

This has been written by AS and reviewed by RS and JT. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was received for this work and/or its publication. AS is supported by grants from NIH (R01 NS143992) and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (I01 RX005298 and I01RD001580). RS is supported by grants from NIH (R01NS119301 and R01NS127435).

Conflict of interest

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The author(s) declared that generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

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