

## EDITORIAL

# Traditions in Public Health Dentistry: A New Feature

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This issue of the *JPHD* initiates a new feature chronicling the history of public health dentistry. Diefenbach (1) recounts his experiences during a two-year assignment with the Public Health Service in Kansas City in the 1950s, and in the process recognizes the contributions of Dr. George Nevitt in developing residency training in public health dentistry. This paper falls into one of three categories of historical writings known as ceremonial or celebratory history (2). These writings generally celebrate the achievements and contributions of individuals and professional organizations, often at some significant milestone. The literature on the history of public health dentistry in the United States consists almost entirely of this type. Histories have been written for the AAPHD (3), the American Board of Dental Public Health (4), the National Institute of Dental Research (5), and the US Public Health Service (6).

For a decade now, proceedings of the awards ceremonies conducted by the AAPHD and the Oral Health Section of the APHA have been published in the *JPHD*. These proceedings record the contributions of outstanding figures in dental public health, and sometimes provide a historical context for their achievements. Since 1993, the *JPHD*'s Associate Editor Dr. Alice Horowitz, who prepares the Archives, ably has provided a historical record in obituaries of notable dental public health figures.

Celebratory history is important. It can make us feel good about our profession because it highlights the rich traditions and advances of public health dentistry. Prominent figures whose contributions are recounted can serve as role models and provide standards for excellence against which we can judge our performances.

A second category of historical writing, deliberative history, is undertaken to persuade readers to support a cause or pursue a particular course of action. With roots in advocacy, it is

concerned with the future as well as the past, characteristics that make historians uneasy. An example is the recent article by Kunitz (7) tracing the development of federal health services for American Indians and Alaskan Natives since the 1940s, and concluding that self-determination policies beginning in the 1970s likely will force Indians into a fragmented, expensive private health care market, possibly leading to a deterioration in the accessibility and quality of their health care.

Historians are taught in their graduate programs to conduct research that leads to a third type of historical writings known as forensic history. Published mostly in scholarly history journals, it explores the nature and extent of an event for the purposes of persuading readers that the event occurred in a particular way, at a particular time in the past, and for particular reasons. The focus is on understanding the causes of the selected event. McClure's (8) classic history of water fluoridation is an excellent example. He thoroughly documented the reasons supporting the recommendation to add an optimum amount of fluoride to community water supplies to prevent dental caries.

The *JPHD* is seeking contributions for the new "Traditions in Public Health Dentistry" feature. Celebratory, deliberative, and forensic writings will be considered. However, historical analyses that inform current policy debates are favored. This aspect of public health dentistry is largely undocumented in the dental literature. Contributions for this feature can be up to 5,000 words in length—longer than the usual scientific manuscript because research documenting past events often requires the use of an eclectic range of techniques and sources in addition to the published literature, including unpublished documents and oral histories, all embellished with photographs. These contributions will undergo peer review. They should conform to the cita-

tion style provided in the "Instructions to Contributors" (*JPHD* 1997;57:63-4), but do not have to conform to the format required of scientific articles.

The history of dental public health can be entertaining! It is laced with many fascinating and useful facts. More importantly, programs, policies, and actions of the past provide an important context in which to interpret and evaluate current developments and to guide policy making, particularly in times of radical and rapid change such as is occurring now. The Roman orator Cicero said, "Not to know what has been transacted in former times is to continue always as a child. If no use is made of the labors of past ages, the world must remain in the infancy of knowledge." The history of public health dentistry is a necessary part of our professional, intellectual, and humanistic development and thus should be readily accessible in the literature so that we can continue to grow.

## References

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