

AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION

The John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award in Dental Public Health—1996 Recipient Dennis Leverett

Presented by Clare L. Shaffer, RDH, MS

It is indeed a privilege for me to participate in the John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award Ceremony, as the membership of the Oral Health Section of the American Public Health Association (APHA) and Colgate Oral Pharmaceuticals of the Colgate Palmolive Company recognize Dennis H. Leverett for his many contributions and outstanding accomplishments in the field of dental public health.

In honoring Dennis we also are honoring the Leverett family, since their continued support and understanding contributed to Dennis' accomplishments. Mrs. Leverett is no stranger to public health dentistry and I am sure many of you have met her at various APHA functions. We are delighted to have Joyce, their son Tim and his wife Jamey with us to share in this evening's celebration. Yes, I did say celebration, as that is exactly what Dennis wanted this event to be.

During one of our telephone conversations last June, Dennis informed me that he had just received a call from Reginald Louie with the news that he was the 1996 recipient of the John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award. I could tell by the tone of his voice, that Dennis was surprised and honored to be the recipient of this prestigious award. As a former APHA Oral Health Section chair, Program chair and Awards Committee chair, he quickly reminded me that there was an awards program that needed to be organized for the annual meeting in New York City and he wondered if I would help him prepare for the event. From 2,000 miles away I knew that Dennis was once again masterminding a plan and he needed "a little help to pull it off." It wasn't until I said yes that I found out the exact definition of a little help. You see, Dennis knew that he would not physically be with us tonight, but he wanted to be with us in

spirit and to personally thank the membership of APHA for honoring him with this award. In mid-June, as a representative of the American Public Health Association, I made a trip to the Leveretts' home in New Mexico, and that is when during a coast to coast conference call Dennis was presented the silver tray and we orchestrated the taping of his acceptance speech, which we will be viewing in a few minutes. I want to thank the Leverett family, Dr. Ron Billings, and Dr. Reg Louie for all their help and support in organizing tonight's award ceremony. It is indeed an honor for me to act as the facilitator in Dennis' Plan and to make the introductory remarks.

As I look out into the audience, I realize that several of you knew Dennis long before I did and many of you have your own interesting stories to tell. My task tonight is to give you a brief perspective on Dennis' background and career. Dennis was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1931. He decided when he was in junior high school that he wanted to be a dentist and he achieved that objective in 1956 when he earned a DDS degree from Ohio State University, School of Dentistry. After graduation he served as an officer in the United States Public Health Service from 1956 to 1960, during which time he managed a mobile dental clinic that provided treatment to Coast Guard personnel stationed in lighthouses along the coast of California. After completing his US Public Health Service obligation, Dennis went into private practice in New Orleans, Louisiana, for six years. In 1966 he accepted a position managing a permanent dental clinic in Las Vegas and a mobile dental clinic in the mountains of northern New Mexico. It was during this time that he decided to pursue a career in dental public health.

Dennis entered Harvard University School of Public Health and in 1968

received an MPH degree. As a research fellow in ecological dentistry at the Harvard School of Dental Medicine, Dennis conducted an evaluation of the Job Corps Dental Program entitled, "A Study in Dental Epidemiology, Program Evaluation and Dental Economics." Dennis told me that this was one of two of the many projects in his career that he would like mentioned tonight. I thought it was because it was his first major research project, and very well done. However, I was soon to learn that he wanted to remind us of the value of having a master plan, no matter how simple, for presenting information and promoting good research. You see, in 1968 he deliberately made the format of the final report too large to fit into a filing cabinet. He did this hoping to force people to read the document, thus executing one subtle technique for disseminating information.

After completing his studies, Dennis and his family moved to Portland, Maine, where he was the executive director of the Center for Community Dental Health from 1969 to 1973. In this position he supervised a school-based education and fluoride supplementation program and the dental treatment services provided at area clinics. Under his direction the program expanded and also took on a research component.

I first met Dennis in 1973 when he assumed the position of chairman of the Department of Community Dentistry at the Eastman Dental Center and became my boss—or should I say mentor, colleague, and good friend. It was Dennis who encouraged me to attend my first APHA meeting in 1975 in Chicago. In his quiet, gentlemanly yet challenging way, he encouraged all of us—colleagues, family, and friends—to take an active role in professional, community, and cultural events.

I recall one event that occurred shortly after Dennis arrived at Eastman, while he was settling into his new office. Dennis loved art and was an artist himself. Every few weeks he would bring in a variety of paintings or pieces of artwork and display them throughout the department. Staff began to think that the new guy was having a hard time deciding on how to decorate his office. They would stop in to see if there had been any recent changes. In actuality, what Dennis was doing was introducing art to the staff and residents by displaying pieces he had borrowed from the public library's art collection. It wasn't long before he was being reminded that it was time for some new art, or getting requests for a particular artist or for a repeat viewing of a painting. Before he knew it, staff members were doing it in other areas. I think we would all have to agree that art appreciation at Eastman Dental Center improved. His plan worked and we still enjoy viewing the artwork he donated to the center.

Dennis was a master of the low-profile type of teaching and leadership. He was a strong believer in teamwork. His philosophy was similar to that of Lao Tsu, who in 700 BC defined a leader as one who will

Go to the People
Live among them
Love them
Start with what they know
Build on what they have
But of the best leaders
When their task is accomplished
Their work is done
The people all remark
We have done it ourselves.

Dennis had a way of posing questions to his colleagues and then working with them to find a solution to which everyone took ownership.

In his role as public health dentist, he had a profound impact on many individuals within the greater Rochester, New York, area. He served as the dental director for the Monroe County (NY) Health Department from 1973 to 1989. He was also director of the Smilemobile, a mobile dental clinic that provided dental treatment to in-

ner-city children in Rochester, NY. In 1984, he was promoted to the rank of professor of dental science at the University of Rochester. Dennis was appointed acting director of the Eastman Dental Center in 1992 and served in that position until his retirement. In recognition of his distinguished career at the center, Dennis was awarded the honorary title of professor emeritus.

Throughout his professional career Dennis was a strong supporter of the practice of dental hygiene. He has been noted for his position and active involvement in legislative efforts to expand the scope of the practice of dental hygiene and to reduce the supervision requirements. He was directly involved in the successful effort in New York State to allow dental hygienists to apply sealants in an effort to prevent pit and fissure caries.

As a researcher, Dennis was the principal investigator of several NIH-funded grants and contracts. Dennis was recognized nationally and internationally for his work in clinical research and public health dentistry, particularly in the areas of sealants, fluorides, and community water fluoridation.

His landmark article on fluorides was published in May 1982 in *Science*. After reviewing the data, he published this paper, which questioned the previously accepted standards for optimal fluoride use and encouraged more research to evaluate the efficacy and cost effectiveness of topical fluorides, and to reassess the dosage of fluoride supplements recommended for infants in communities without fluoridated water. At that time, this was a highly courageous paper, since Dennis was willing to talk openly on the issue of fluoridation. He was doing what a scientist does: he was being a thinker. Dennis asked me to mention this paper tonight because he wanted to remind all of us that it is our obligation to ask the questions and not to allow politics to stand in the way of good science. We must continue to be open minded, to constantly review the data, to ask the questions, and to be prepared to evaluate the issues.

Dennis published another landmark paper on the cost effectiveness of

the use of sealants in the prevention and early treatment of incipient carious lesions. He was an advocate of the use of sealants in community-based treatment and prevention programs. He felt that there is still a need for longitudinal research on sealant use because there are some unanswered questions about the value of their use in public health programs.

Dennis was a diplomate of the American Board of Dental Public Health. He was a member of several professional organizations including the American Association of Public Health Dentistry and APHA. As editor of the *Journal of Public Health Dentistry* for nine years, his organizational skills and vision resulted in the publishing of a quality journal. In 1993 he received the AAPHD Distinguished Service Award and served as president of the organization in 1996.

Dennis also served APHA in several leadership positions, including section chair and Governing Council. His leadership and skills as an open-minded scientist, teacher, and clinical researcher made him a role model in the field of dental public health. During his career, he made major contributions to improving oral health throughout the world; as a result, he truly earned the recognition he received in June from the Oral Health Section of APHA by being named the 1996 recipient of the John W. Knutson Award for Distinguished Service in Dental Public Health.

When I was with Dennis in New Mexico approximately two weeks before he died, despite deteriorating health he was working on completing a paper discussing the results of a prenatal fluoride supplementation study he had conducted with NIH and the Center for Community Dental Health in Portland, Maine. He wanted to share the findings from this study with other researchers because he felt the information was of value to the scientific world. Dennis was truly dedicated to his research and working to improve oral health. So, tonight, let us celebrate the life of a person who has set an example for all of us in his deep commitment to the advancement of science and dental public health.