

Remarks on Receiving the Special Merit Award

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Thank you, Rhys, and thank you to the American Association of Public Health Dentistry for this most appreciated but unexpected honor. I was at my office a few months ago and returned to my desk to find a message to return a call to Rhys Jones. My first thought was, I wonder what committee I'm going to be asked to serve on. Not wanting to prolong the suspense, I called Rhys immediately, only to find out I had been selected to receive the AAPHD Special Merit Award. For one of the few times in my life I was truly speechless. My first reaction was to ask if he was sure it was for me. Now that I have had some time to let the news sink in, I am still asking the same question. Before this meeting Rhys said he had one request, "Just tell everyone why you think you deserve the award and what it means to you—and, by the way, don't take too long to do it." I promise this won't take too long.

This award represents the single most important recognition I have received as a public health dentist. AAPHD was the first professional organization I joined and has remained the professional association I most closely identify with. It is not false modesty that causes me to look around this room and wonder "why me?"

My start in dental public health was more chance than the result of some well-developed master plan: I had failed to pass the Montana dental boards and needed a job. Some friends from dental school who were working with the Indian Health Service suggested that I try to get a job as a contract dentist for the Indian Health Service until I could retake the Montana boards. Not having many other options, I took their advice and signed a six-month contract to work at a Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school in Holbrook, Arizona, as a clinical dentist. What was supposed to be a six-month position has somehow become a 21-year dental public health career. I never did go back to Montana to take the dental boards.

I continued to work in dental public health for many reasons. It didn't matter if I was doing clinical dentistry in a mobile dental trailer 35 miles from the nearest gas station or presenting a paper at an international conference—dental public health never ceased to be rewarding. I always found myself to be working with fantastic people, doing things that were important. Occasionally, we even seemed to make a difference. As my public health career developed, I found myself getting further from the individual patient and starting to practice more community dentistry. At first "my" community was a remote Navajo elementary school in northern Arizona, later it was the White Mountain Apache Reservation. Next I moved to CDC and started working with national and international public health programs. In all these positions and programs the objective was always the same: improving the oral health of the population.

In his introductory remarks, Rhys used two words to describe me: courage and leadership. I'm not going to argue with someone I respect as much as Rhys Jones. I will say that it is easy to be courageous when you believe strongly in something and when that in which you believe is threatened. Dental public health faces many obstacles now. Our past successes in improving our nation's oral health have ironically become one of our most significant obstacles to further improvements. Increasingly, dental diseases are viewed as insignificant or under control. While this may be true for many in the nation, for many others—minority populations, lower income groups, and those without adequate insurance coverage—pain, suffering, and insurmountable dental care costs remain facts of everyday life. Dental public health needs to be courageous and embrace new technologies, new targeted prevention opportunities, and improved disease surveillance. We must continue demonstrating the prevention effectiveness and cost benefit of dental disease pre-

vention strategies for today's populations. We should be prepared to rethink some of our dogmas in the face of new information and be willing to change. Reliance on our past 60 years of success will not necessarily assure 60 years of future success.

The other word Rhys cited was that of leadership. While I did not agree with much during his presidency, I did agree with Ronald Reagan when he said that to be a good leader you should "Surround yourself with the best people you can find, delegate authority, and don't interfere." Leadership is based on being able to work with people to accomplish shared goals while coordinating the various activities. Few professions have a better history of teamwork than ours. I have been fortunate to have worked with some of the best people in our profession. Together we have been able to accomplish much. Most of the success I have had is directly related to the tremendous contributions of those working with me and their ability to overcome obstacles and produce results. Amazingly, our greatest success did occur when I interfered the least.

Two weeks ago I retired from my position as the director, Division of Oral Health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as a commissioned officer in the US Public Health Service. My retirement and the receipt of this award have both given me reason to reflect on my public health career to date. There are far too many people to thank individually who have significantly contributed to my career and still keep this presentation short. I do, however, want to acknowledge and thank my wife of 19 years, Kathy, for her constant support during the tough times, long hours, frequent moves, and those times when I was too preoccupied with work. Without her, none of this would have happened. Thank you so much!

Lastly, I want to once again thank AAPHD and all of you for this award as well as for your support and friendship these past 21 years. Thank you.