

The John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award in Dental Public Health—1997 Recipient John C. Greene

Presented by William F. Bird, DDS, DrPH

Tonight we have the opportunity to recognize one of the nation's and world's great leaders in dental public health, Dr. John C. Greene.

When I was asked by John to present him this award tonight, I was awed because he has played such an important role in the dental health of so many people and I was honored because I have had the opportunity to work with him for many of his 45 years in public health. I also had concern, in that I knew to introduce such a leader in our profession in a few short minutes, and do him justice, would be a challenge. As John and I discussed this evening's presentation, he said that he would like to keep it light, not to bore them with all that heavy C.V. stuff and use the Paul Harvey approach of "The rest of the story." With that in mind, I will review John's career, letting him tell "the rest of the story." I also will show a few brief excerpts, in John's own words, from a 97-minute video tape courtesy of the International College of Dentists, Leaders in Dentistry Project, the Interviewer, Dr. Richard Adelson.

John was born in the small town of Ashland, Kentucky, and grew up on a farm nearby where he, his mother and father, and his five brothers and sisters worked the farm. His father, a mail carrier and farmer, was also a semi-pro baseball player and always found time to engage the family in games on the farm and developed in John a love for the game of baseball, which he played in high school. This tie to baseball is important and will become obvious as we proceed through John's career in public health.

(Video excerpt #1. Dad's Influences.) ["My dad was one of my major heroes in life. He had a great influence on me; of course my mother did, too, but he kept counseling me. I learned a lot from him on morals and what is good in life and what is not good, and he taught me how to live and how to die; he was just a very brave soldier, a



John C. Greene.

great guy."]

After attending Ashland Jr. College for a year, John enlisted in the US Navy and spent the last two years of WW II as an electronics specialist. Ending his Navy career at San Diego, he returned to Kentucky, graduated from Ashland Junior College, attended the University of Louisville School of Dentistry, and graduated in 1952. After graduating in the top of his class in dental school, Dr. Greene planned to join the private practice of dentistry with his family's dentist, Dr. Hall, in Ashland. It was Dr. Hall who was responsible for encouraging him to choose dentistry as a career instead of his other choices of farming or electrical engineering. But first John wanted to be better prepared and "a little more experienced," so he entered the US Public Health Service as an intern at the USPHS Hospital in Chicago. And, as they say, the rest is history. Moving on to his next assignment as a staff clinical dentist at the PHS Hospital in San Francisco in 1953, John now knew exactly what he wanted as his career direction: to be an oral surgeon. That never came to pass. His superiors had other challenges in mind and John rap-

idly moved from clinical dentistry to being a public health dentist in the Region IX PHS office in San Francisco, then on to Atlanta as a Fellow in the CDC Epidemic Intelligence Service.

It was in Atlanta that he met Gwen, who was to eventually become his wife. Together they raised three children, a son and twin daughters, and they now have six grandchildren. Leaving Atlanta in 1957, he spent several months as a special consultant for the World Health Organization, in India, concerning periodontal disease and teaching them Russell's PI. After the WHO assignment, he returned to NIH/NIDR and refined the Greene and Vermillion Oral Hygiene Index, for which he is world renowned and which is one of John's most memorable accomplishments. John may tell us a story about an experience he had in Japan connected with the OHI. While he and Jack Vermillion were developing the OHI, it had several names—including the crud index and the Christmas Index (after their last names of Greene and Vermillion)—but neither of those had public health-sounding titles, so they settled on the OHI, later to be revised as the OHI-S.

Dr. Greene then had the opportunity to work for two years as assistant to the chief dental officer, who at that time was Dr. John W. Knutson. After two years as Dr. Knutson's assistant, he went to the Berkeley School of Public Health and received his MPH degree in 1961. For the next five years he served as the chief of the Epidemiology Program at San Francisco, then served as director of the Division of Dental Health from 1966–73. He became the chief dental officer of the US Public Health Service in 1973 and continued in that capacity while being appointed as deputy surgeon general of the Public Health Service in 1978.

(Video excerpt #2. Interview with the surgeon general before being appointed deputy surgeon general.) ["When I was called by the surgeon

general and asked whether or not ... I would be willing to come ... there, he wanted to talk with me about it. In the interview with the surgeon general, he went over my background with me (he had already looked up my background and was familiar with it) and he asked me a very interesting question. Why shouldn't you do this and what are your weaknesses and so forth? I said, 'Your biggest problem, Surgeon General Sir, is the fact that I am not a physician, I am a dentist.' He said, 'I know that. Why do you say that?' 'Well, it has always been a physician and your physician friends are really going to be upset if you have a dentist in here, someone other than a physician.' He said, 'You just convinced me that I should do it.' He was a very wise man, in that he felt that he should not be limited in the degree by what a person might be able to do in that role. I was very proud of the fact that he asked me to be his deputy."]

Being a dentist in what had been traditionally a physician's role presented John with different challenges, especially when Surgeon General Dr. Julius Richmond was out of the country and John had to fill in at speaking engagements. But none of those challenges were beyond his capabilities, including leading a SWAT team in flack jackets to quell a riot at St. Elizabeth Hospital in Bethesda during the Cuban refugee crisis. Calling on his Navy and hospital clinical experience, he was able to lead the team and secure the hospital and restore it back to order. Dr. Greene continued to serve in both roles of chief dental officer and deputy surgeon general until he retired from the Public Health Service in 1981.

Being idle was not John's style, so he accepted the position of dean of the School of Dentistry at the University of California, San Francisco, in 1981.

(Video segment #3. Interview for UCSF dean.) ["Some of my friends from California contacted me and said that there was a deanship open in San Francisco and wondered if I would come and take a look at it. I said no. I live in Washington and the family is settled and we are happy here. My friends said, 'Isn't it true that you are going to be visiting the West Coast, so why not at least look at it?' So when I was there, I took a look and they got me interested in it and I ended up being there. During the interview

process, a lot of people were asking, what does this dry-fingered dentist, public health, bureaucrat from the federal government who has never had a full-time position in an academic setting, know about dental education? Why is he capable of becoming a dean? I got asked that question from a lot of people there, especially the alumni. I said that, first of all, I am licensed in California and I have taken your state board and did the gold foil and all that before. I believe that management is a major issue in education today and I have a lot of management experience and I've been monitoring health professions schools of all kinds and I believe that is good background for it and I believe that there are key people here that know a lot about the workings of dental education, I bring a different perspective. Together, I hope we can do it."]

After becoming dean, he was immediately challenged by the university's chancellor to make the UCSF Dental School one of the top schools in the nation. As John has indicated, the faculty of UCSF were concerned about how he would meet this challenge since he was a public health, not a wet-fingered, dentist. They were soon to find out that, as an elected member of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and on the Pew Planning Committee, he would lead them to meet the challenge. He was so successful that UCSF has been the leader of all the nation's dental schools in National Institutes of Health funding and for a number of grants received for the past five years. Routinely, over 90 percent of the UCSF dental graduates pass the California State Boards on the first try. While serving as dean, Dr. Greene also served as president of both the American Association of Dental Research as well as the International Association of Dental Research, and as chair of the Administrative Board of the Council of Deans of the American Association of Dental Schools.

After retiring from UCSF in 1994, John has continued to serve public health. He currently serves as the co-chair of the UCSF Chancellor's Task Force on the Impact of Health Care Reform on the Academic Health Center, is a member of the Pew grant program, Health Profession's Schools in Service to the Nation, and serves on the NIH Advisory Committee on Research on Women's Health to the Na-

tion. John is the AADR's representative on the National Cancer Institute's National Tobacco-free Steering Committee and continues his work on the use of smokeless tobacco, being active in the National Spit Tobacco Education Program, known as the NSTEP Program. Remember the baseball connection from the early days with his father? Along with his love of the game, John also is continuing his work with the professional baseball players at spring training camps as part of the NSTEP Program.

As I was preparing these comments, I had the opportunity to speak with many of Dr. Greene's friends and professional colleagues. Each and every one of them attested to John's accomplishments and that he had been a major force in their success and the success of dental public health programs in this country and around the world. I wish I could recite to you all of the wonderful comments I received, but I shall read only one that exhibits the respect John Greene commands. This letter, dated October 27, 1997, is from Joe Garagiola, and reads:

Dear Friends:

You picked a winner when you chose to honor John Greene. He sets a goal and goes after it. He does it in a quiet positive way. Slow but sure. I told him after my first day with him that it must take him an hour and a half to watch "60 Minutes." He keeps moving forward. He's like a Rolls Royce while I'm an 18-wheeler on a bumpy road. If John and I went to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier I would have trouble finding it ... he would go right to it and then tell me his serial number. It was my lucky day when I met John Greene.

One of my favorite philosophers is Mark Twain and he once said something that fits John Greene to a tee ... "Kindness is a language that the deaf man can hear and the blind man can read." John Greene is now my friend and I am grateful for that but I'm most happy that we are now partners in this "spit tobacco" fight.

Over the years, Dr. Greene has been the recipient of many other honors and awards. Among the many include: his holding honorary doctoral degrees

from three universities: Boston University, the University of Kentucky, and the University of Louisville. Other awards include the Meritorious Service Award and the Distinguished Service Award from the US Department of Health Education and Welfare, the Fédération Dentaire International Award of Merit, the Outstanding Pro-

fessional Award from the Pierre Fauchard Academy, and the AAPHD's Distinguished Service Award. He has been honored as alumnus of the year by both the University of Louisville and the University of California, Berkeley School of Public Health.

John, all of us in dental public health

are grateful for your hard work and the many contributions to our field. It is my pleasure to introduce the 1997 recipient of the John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award of the Oral Health Section of the American Public Health Association—Dr. John C. Greene.

Remarks by Dr. John C. Greene on Receiving the John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award

John C. Greene, DMD, MPH

I want to thank the Oral Health Section of the APHA for presenting me with the 1997 John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award. I am deeply touched by this prestigious honor. It means a great deal to me to join the ranks of those giants in dental public health who have been so honored before. I have had the privilege of meeting all of the previous awardees and have worked with or for many of them. To be listed with them is a great honor, indeed, and one which I shall always cherish. Special thanks to Dr. Jared Fine, Oral Health Section chair, Dr. Esther Colchamiro, Awards Committee chair, and to the Awards Committee for this great honor. Many thanks also to Dr. Christopher Fox and the Colgate Oral Pharmaceuticals of the Colgate Palmolive Company for making this award ceremony possible and for the generous honorarium.

This award has very special meaning for me since it was established in honor of Dr. John W. Knutson, who was my mentor for two years while he was chief dental officer of the US Public Health Service. Dr. Knutson was a visionary leader who by his stature, position, personality, and persuasion had a major impact on dentistry worldwide. He was active not only in the PHS, but also in the American Public Health Association (the first dentist to serve as its president), the American Dental Association, the Fédération Dentaire Internationale, and the World Health Organization. Dr. Knutson was a man of considerable physi-

cal stature, personal presence, and professional standing. He set high standards for himself and for those around him. I found him to be very thoughtful and caring, with a great sense of humor. Working for him was a high point in my career and I am very thankful for that honor and privilege.

I want to thank Dr. Bird for his generous introduction. I especially appreciate all of the effort he went to, to check on my background. He was very flattering and I appreciate the fact that he shared only positive things that he learned about me and my career. Now I would like to provide some balance to this picture, or as Paul Harvey would say, "Now for the rest of the story." I hope you will indulge me as I take you on an informal walk through a few aspects of my career and tell you about some things that never appeared in print.

I didn't start out to be a public health dentist—or even a dentist, for that matter. My goal was to be a gentleman farmer in the Lexington, Kentucky, area. But after returning from a short tour in the Navy during world War II, I went to the University of Louisville School of Dentistry. After graduation I applied for an internship in the US Public Health Service. The PHS regional dental consultant contacted Professor Robinson at the University of Louisville, and asked him what he thought about me and whether he would recommend me for the internship. He said he didn't know much about me except that I graduated with

an excellent record and that I used to sleep through his classes in public health. He said he had checked on me to see why I slept so much in class and after he found out what my schedule was he felt sorry for me and just let me sleep. You see, I had to work to be able to pay tuition and living costs and I was so tired on Monday mornings when his classes were held I used to sit in the back of the room and sleep.

After my PHS internship in Chicago, I was transferred to San Francisco to be a member of the hospital dental staff. I developed a keen interest in oral surgery and filled out my application for oral surgery training by the PHS. But before I could mail it, I received transfer orders to the San Francisco regional office. It seemed that a fellow Kentuckian, Dr. George Nevitt, had taken an interest in me and requested that I be assigned to his office. That was my first exposure to dental public health—not by choice, but by assignment. I asked Dr. Nevitt what I was supposed to do, since dental public health was all new to me. He took me to the adjoining office and introduced me to Mr. Jack Vermillion and asked him to give me an orientation and to tell me what to do. Jack gave me a huge stack of books and papers to read and gave me a rapid course in dental public health, which was the beginning of my public health career. It also was the beginning of a special personal and professional relationship that has endured these many years.