

AAPHD 2001 Distinguished Service Award: Brian Burt, BDS, MPH, PhD

Presented by Dushanka V. Kleinman, DDS, MScD

The AAPHD Distinguished Service Award is presented to an individual for excellent and distinguished service to public health dentistry. This year's recipient is Dr. Brian Burt. Dr. Burt is professor, Department of Epidemiology; director, Program in Dental Public Health, School of Public Health; and Professor, School of Dentistry, at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. He also is the incoming president of the American Board of Dental Public Health.

Brian, as you may gather, is not a native Michigander. He is a third generation Australian with ancestors who arrived around the 1850s gold rush from England, Ireland, and Germany. His father was a newspaperman who was recruited by Keith Murdoch to work on the *Melbourne Herald* and served on MacArthur's intelligence staff during World War II, one of three Australians in the 26-man American unit. Brian attributes his interest in the United States to his father's war stories. Brian and his sister were born in Melbourne, and the family moved to Perth after the war. His father and mother, a shrewd businesswoman, encouraged their children to pursue professional careers, and Brian and his sister were the first from either family to attend university. Brian narrowed his career choices down to medicine and dentistry—but was persuaded by his uncle, a successful dental practitioner, that dentists work regular hours, while a physician is always on call. Brian received his bachelor of dental science degree from the University of Western Australia in Perth.

It was not until after dental school that Brian was smitten by the public health bug. His first position was as a clinical staff dentist of the Perth Dental Hospital and as a part-time private practitioner. As Brian himself has said, "It was practicing in a state government clinic in outback Western Australia in the early 1960s that got me thinking about public health. Oral health was so appalling at that time

that I thought I could spend my life here drilling and filling and nothing would change. To look for a better way, Lizzie and I headed for Ann Arbor five days after we were married. In Michigan I learned from Dave Striffler, and nothing was ever the same again."

Brian received his master of public health degree from the University of Michigan in 1966 and his doctor of philosophy (in oral epidemiology) from the University of London in 1973. Prior to his training in London, Brian was a public health advisor at the Division of Dental Health, USPHS, in Bethesda for a year and a half. While in London, Brian also served as a lecturer in the Community Dentistry Unit of the London Hospital Dental School. During these developmental years, Brian was influenced by Geoffrey Slack (who knew the value of epidemiology and having data to support an argument), David Barmes (who was a major inspiration in his professional and personal life), and of course David Striffler, who succeeded in luring him back to Ann Arbor in 1974. Brian has said that David's "style of teaching was self-discovery, such a pleasant change from the ram-it-down-your-throat style of dental school." The rest is history.

Although he may not look like it, Brian is a grandfather times two. He

and his wife, Lizzie, a culinary expert in M-Fit, the University of Michigan's outreach program for healthy living, have two grown sons who live in Colorado. One son is a bank manager who almost went to the 1994 Winter Olympics as a mogul skier, and the other is a chief computer operator. Both sons live in Gunnison-Crested Butte, Colorado. (I now know where one of our future meetings should be located). This coming June 10th, Brian and Lizzie will celebrate their 36th anniversary, the same day that Jane Weintraub and Chris Barker will be married.

Brian has been a firm believer in a balanced life and has refused to become a workaholic. As most of you know, sports have always been an essential part of Brian's life. His mother was a club-level tennis champ. In his youth he enjoyed rough sports such as surfing and he did well at tennis, squash, cricket, and Aussie Rules football. Running, however, has been a mainstay sport for both Brian and Lizzie. Brian has run 18 marathons, including Boston seven times, and has completed the Hawaii Triathlon eight times. In addition, he has run many shorter races as well as other triathlons. Lizzie has run the Boston marathon three times and last year was fourth in her age group at the world triathlon championships in Perth. Music from Fleetwood Mac, Pink Floyd, Beatles, Creedence Clearwater Revival, and others blast out while they work out at their home. Most recently Brian has tested his manual skills, not by practicing dentistry, but by managing a chainsaw—clearing out his land to build a home. We need to watch the Guinness Book of World Records to see if Brian appears in the section on chainsaw handling.

Brian has given unselfishly of his time to professional organizations, national and international agencies, to his university, and to a life-long commitment to editorial consulting and editing. He has served on numerous



Dr. Kleinman and Dr. Burt.

advisory and review committees. These activities have included the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Office of Child Development (DHHS), the National Academy of Sciences, World Health Organization, American Dental Association, American Association for Dental Research, World Dental Federation, and the University of Malaya. His expertise has been used for the review of research grants and projects, to provide advice on fluoride policies, for the review of advanced education programs in dental public health, and for consultation for Project Head Start. Brian's editorial and manuscript review activities have been substantial. Since 1997 he has been the editor of *Community Dentistry and Oral Epidemiology*, the journal for which he was associate editor since 1988. He has been an editorial board

member for the *Journal of Dental Research* and editorial consultant of the *Journal of Public Health Policy* for 18 years. He has coauthored several widely read dental public health texts: "Dental Public Health: an Introduction to Community Dentistry and Dentistry, Dental Practice, and the Community" (third, fourth, and fifth editions).

Brian has authored or coauthored over 150 publications. His work has addressed oral diseases and conditions and their prevention. Included in his publications are studies of dental caries, periodontal diseases, tooth loss, fluorosis, and the caries preventive effects of fluorides, sealants, and diet. He also has reported on studies of dental health education, health care delivery systems, ethics, economic analyses, and the development and value of various oral epidemiologic indices. As I look around this room, many of

Brian's coauthors are sprinkled in this audience. Brian has been admired by his students for his detailed grasp of the literature and his willingness to give his time and full attention to them. They also have appreciated his and Lizzie's dinner party each year ... an extravagant and luscious treat.

In the letter to Brian, we stated that this award is meant to "recognize your tireless efforts on behalf of the AAPHD mission and the health of the public. Your career embodies a commitment to understanding and improving oral health. We wish to recognize your significant contributions toward improving oral health through research, teaching, and mentoring. We also appreciate your energetic work and leadership in editing the primary dental public health text used by so many throughout the world." Thank you!

Remarks on Receiving the 2001 Distinguished Service Award

Brian A. Burt, BDS, MPH, PhD

Thank you, Dushanka, for all those kind words. My first reaction on receiving the news of this award was how privileged I am to be added to this list of the giants in our field. It is a signal honor that I appreciate deeply.

A time like this doesn't come all that often, so it leads to some reflection about how on earth did I get here anyway. Why did I choose public health instead of a nice comfortable suburban practice? In retrospect, I think the die was cast pretty soon after I got out of dental school, even though I didn't recognize it at the time. I had gone through dental school in Perth on a scholarship from the Western Australian government, and in return I owed them five years of service. (When policy discussions come around to service-payback plans in dental education, I'm an expert!). After a few months in central dental clinics, I was appointed the first dentist-in-charge of the Western Australian State Health Depart-

ment's new mobile dental operatory. This mobile clinic, which was state-of-the-art at the time, was headed for the outback where the people were few, the dust penetrated everything, where the doctor arrived in an airplane, and no dentists existed for many hundreds of miles. I needed to be a genuine all-round dentist for that job, for I was going as a raw rookie to where no experienced colleagues were around to refer the hard stuff to. The skills I needed for this job were not all related to dental care—before we left Perth I was packed off to learn a lot of machinery maintenance from a mechanic at the Public Works Department, and then I had to get my truck driver's license to let me legally drive the mobile unit.

The outback in Australia is vaguely defined as the country a good distance from the amenities of the major cities. In those days it had not been glamorized by Crocodile Dundee, "Surviv-

vor," Steve the Crocodile Hunter, and the Discovery Channel. This city boy found that living in the outback towns for any length of time took a lot of adaptation. Even moving the mobile unit around through the summer dust and the wet-season mud at times took a lot of ingenuity. For most of the time I was the only male in a team of three or four, which I hasten to assure you was not quite what it might sound to be. Life in the outback could get lonely and monotonous. It really was hard work with long and unorthodox hours required to treat people who might have driven for hours to get to the clinic, although I usually didn't mind because there wasn't much else to do.

Dental needs at this time and place were unbelievable, totally overwhelming. This period, the early 1960s, was near enough to the peak of the caries epidemic. There were days when it seemed I worked all day with a pair of forceps in each hand. Al-