

AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION

The John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award in Dental Public Health—2001 Recipient Robert E. Mecklenburg

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I am honored to have the opportunity on this special occasion to say a few words about our 2001 Knutson Awardee this evening, Robert Ellis Mecklenburg. Admiral Mecklenburg, please allow me to call you "Meck."

My first encounter with Meck was at the annual AAPHD meeting in the mid-1970s presided over by President Mecklenburg. It was a meeting where bold actions were taken. The association was at a crossroads—this was clear to all, even to neophyte public healthers. I watched Meck in action during the heated and animated business meeting. At that time, the association acronym stood for the American Association of Public Health Dentists and only dentists were allowed to be voting members. I will never forget the debate and the outcome as Meck lead the group to broaden the voting membership base and reflect the change in the association's name. (It then became the American Association of Public Health Dentistry). I was impressed and realized that this was a person I needed to learn from. What I did not know at that time was that Meck would be a life-long teacher for me and for others, one who would always accept the request for help, one who would always give of himself, and one who continues to pave the way for others. I am delighted to give you a glimpse of this role model, mentor, and friend.

Meck the Model Builder, Idea Generator, and Concept Engineer

Those of us who have been privileged to have been around Meck for several decades have benefited from his idea-generating feats. He abounds with concepts, theses, and philosophies. To be honest, at first his intense and lengthy monologues put us to sleep; but quickly and silently these concepts jarred and penetrated our thinking, infused our debates,

and—like idea viruses—they infected and multiplied in our midst.

I can only assume that Meck's ability to construct theories came from his childhood fascination and experience with model airplane building. Family lore states that Meck began his enchantment with planes when WWII started. Meck and his friends even sneaked into the airport and were caught trying to climb into a plane. A model store that he often frequented during his adolescent years had such a valued and trusted customer in Meck that, when the owner passed away, Meck was asked to run the store. Making the parts fit together to make the whole, and creating an entity that could achieve rapid, targeted flight and take you to experience another level is something with which Meck has been enamored throughout his career.

I cannot do justice to all of Meck's theories and concepts—but one of his early theories was a model of four general eras of the public's expectation for oral health over the centuries. For those who are early in their years, this model is depicted in Figure 1, pre-

sented on many occasions as Meck explained over and over the progress of the profession and of the benefits to the public. This model also inspired other Knutson awardees. Figure 2 is Hersh Horowitz' rendition of Meck's model, acknowledging Meck's initial presentation dating back to 1982 (and probably earlier).

Meck's Vision of the Future

Meck's familiar use of the wise words of the Cheshire Cat in Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" is something most of us have heard. I can only assume that Meck's mother read from this book to him, and that he and Donna in turn read this book to their children. For those of you not familiar with Alice's encounter with the Cheshire Cat, here is the excerpt Meck often referred to in his talks. It begins with Alice's question:

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"
 "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.
 "I don't much care where..." said

FIGURE 1
Model of Four General Eras of Public Expectation for Oral Health

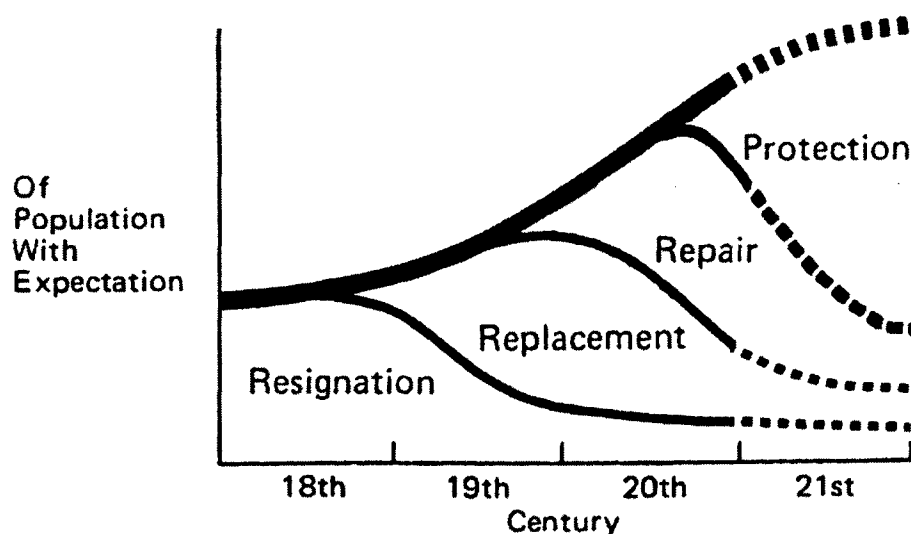
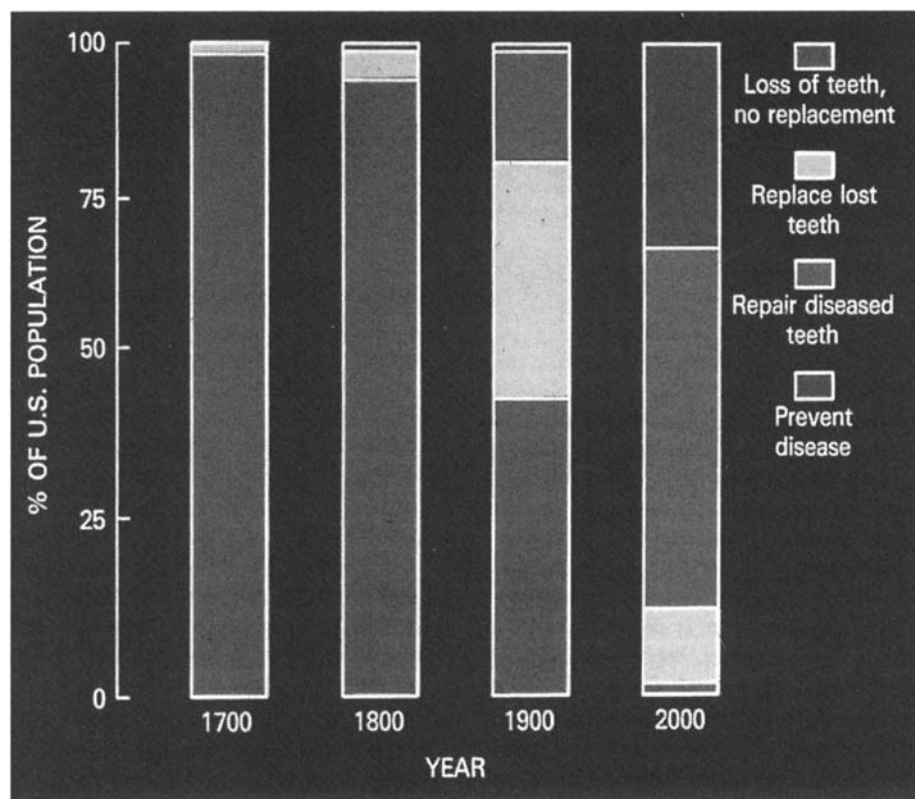


FIGURE 2
US Public's Perception of Possible Approaches to Oral Disease Control
 (After Mecklenburg, 1982)



Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

"...so long as I get somewhere," Alice added as an explanation.

"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."

It matters to Meck which way we go and how we go. He consistently has led us in the right directions. His writings, his words, and his own actions have focused and refocused us on the future. His "View from Here" articles in the *Indian Health Service* newsletter from 1972-80 were visionary. In addition, a brief review of selected titles of his publications gives you a flavor of his perseverance of a vision for the future: "When an evaluation for quality is not" (1971); "Improving the application of knowledge" (1971); "Opening the doors to better oral health" (1977); "Organizing public health dentistry" (1977); "Where the association (AAPHD) should be"

(1979); "The new federalism: hard times, hard choices" (1980); "New perspectives for public health dentistry" (1985); "Beyond the year 2000: bellwethers and forecasts" (1983); and "Creating a future for dental public health" (1990). Meck does not hide his intent. He does not mince words. He has clearly articulated and described the future and where we need to go over and over again—with patience and grace. Meck cares where we should be going and he has taken every occasion to lay out the directions.

Meck also is a keen observer of humankind. Here is a passage that he wrote almost two decades ago, still relevant today: "Discoveries, new inventions, and original concepts of benefit to mankind generally occur at unpredictable times and in unexpected places. Likewise, major difficulties are often produced by novel circumstances that are unforeseen, although understood in retrospect. Social programs at the federal, state, and

community level, and indeed individual lives, are generally organized to manage the ordinary and predictable, but are often unequipped to quickly respond to either unexpected opportunity or crisis." Hauntingly, these words reflect our experience from 9/11/2001 to date.

Meck also is self-effacing, as the title of his 1982 lecture at the Massachusetts State Health Department exemplifies: "A Bird's Eye View or Head in the Clouds."

Not Just Smoke and Mirrors

Upon his retirement as the assistant surgeon general and chief dental officer and a 30-year career in the Public Health Service, Meck began a journey in tobacco control activities of the most diverse and expansive nature. Meck's tobacco activities exemplify his approach to life in general. His first official reference to his leadership in tobacco control is as chair of the "Non-cancer Oral Effects Committee for the First Report to the Surgeon General on the Health Consequences of Using Smokeless Tobacco" (1986).

He applied his model-building skills toward tobacco control. He used every piece of the public health tool kit to create an initiative that has taken flight nationally and internationally. He built coalitions—creating the National Dental Tobacco-free Steering Committee (made up of 15 dental organizations), an entity that lasted a decade. He developed and perpetuated tobacco prevention and cessation policies in both national and international professional organizations. He broadened, educated, and prepared a multidisciplinary network of health care providers—reaching thousands of health care professionals through these efforts. He published with an incredibly diverse group of coauthors in journals and publications. He took global action even further: co-organizing and directing the World Dentistry Against Tobacco Section of the *Fédération Dentaire Internationale* and reorganized it in 1999 to the Tobacco and Oral Health Committee. He focused on subpopulations of tobacco users—such as hard-core tobacco users and role models (spit tobacco). He also developed and promulgated clinical guidelines for tobacco cessation that were recently updated. He served as a consultant to the National Cancer Institute, National Institute of Dental

and Craniofacial Research, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, governments around the world, industry, and nonprofit organizations. Again—because he was trusted, valued, and effective—Meck was deployed and became part of the leadership team during the tobacco settlement negotiations between industry and Congress and helped many states with their own negotiations.

The Evolution of Meck

He was born in 1933 in Morris, Minnesota. He was the baby of the family, born quite a few years after his sister. Aileen—his mother—was an only child, and H.A.—his father—was one of 10 children. They exemplified service to the public. Meck's mother was a successful salesperson at Dayton's department store. Women would drive 100 miles to get her advice and service. Meck's dad was a banker who worked in the Federal Land Bank Survey after the Depression. It is clear that their hard-working ethic imprinted their son Robert.

It would appear that Meck seemed to just fall into things—but I don't believe that. Apparently dentistry was selected as a career choice due to counsel from his father and a close family friend who was a dentist because both recognized that Meck was "good with his hands." The Public Health Service as a career direction seemed to be a chance selection—one day he was studying for exams, procrastinating, and saw an announcement in the bulletin board to apply. Applications were due that day; Meck called and found out that he could still apply and sent his application by Western Union immediately. The rest is history.

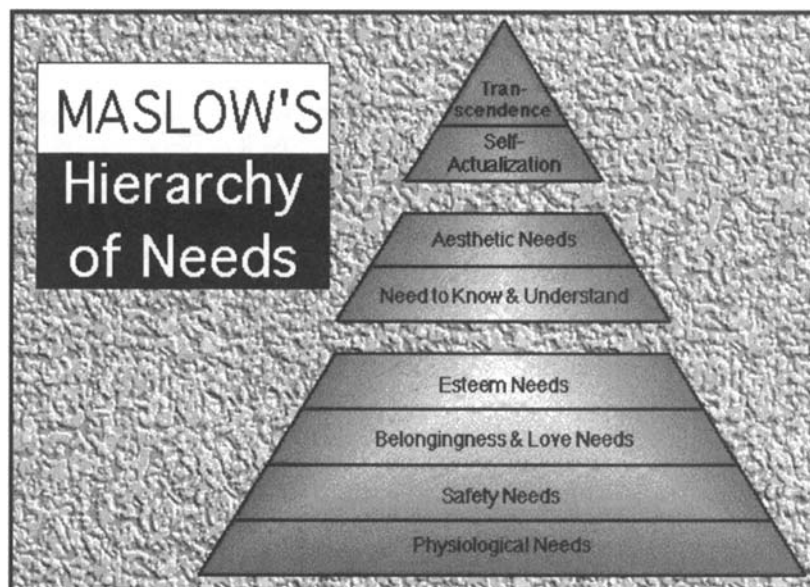
Meck also had good fortune with his life partner. I was told that Meck met his beloved wife Donna one evening at a church social event. Meck was the head of the church youth fellowship and Donna was a nursing student at the time. The sparks must have flown immediately for Meck got her telephone number, came home that evening and told his mother that "I know who I want to marry." Donna and Meck's partnership created a welcome home for all throughout their life together. They were health professional partners. Donna worked as a nurse at many of the early assignments—Staten Island, Pine Ridge, Montana, Nevada. They experienced parent-

hood three times and grandparenthood five times. Their children include David, who is in sales with a printing company; Sherry, a physical therapist who now is a full-time mother; and Daniel, an environmental engineer. Donna and Meck were host and hostess to international students, residents, dignitaries, and more. Together they were mentors and role models to all of us. Meck, please accept our sympathy for Donna's passing. We all will miss her gracious, caring, and gentle presence.

Meck's Ethics and Professionalism

I asked Meck's son, David, when his father's interest in ethics and professionalism began. He replied, "That's been dad as long as I've known him." On paper, Meck began to hold formal leadership positions in ethics within the past decade. He was the chair of the first AAPHD ethics committee, a position he has held since 1994. He crafted the association's Ethics Policy and then developed the Implementation Plan. He participated as the AAPHD representative in the two sentinel Ethics Summits organized by the American College of Dentists (ACD), and is a member of the ACD Ethics Task Force and Ethics Committee. He has served as a spokesperson on ethics in dentistry domestically and internationally—delivering the 1996 Cyril R. Mirmelstein Ethics Lecture at Virginia Commonwealth University on ethics and professionalism.

FIGURE 3



An untitled paper written by Meck, dated 1/13/84 and uncovered by Bill Maas, describes exquisitely how Meck views the philosophy and ethic that form the foundations of the learned professions. I share these words so that you will hear Meck's commitment and grasp of professionalism and ethics. In that paper he speaks about the Commissioned Corps and states that both the corps and the professions share a spirit of:

Questing for truth and a wider and deeper understanding of life and humankind's (man's) relationship with each other (himself) and with their (his) environment.

Selfless giving of that truth, to bring elegantly simple understanding of complex issues to every citizen and all institutions so that a free people can make appropriate decisions about their own health and well being.

Openness to new ideas so as to maintain maximum flexibility and innovativeness in thought for the express purpose of responding to information that will best assure the creation of the most suitable methods for disease protection and health promotion.

Integrity with the concept of public above personal interest, to be prepared to serve any place, any

time, and in any way that will best achieve health objectives.

One only needs to listen to Robert Ellis Mecklenburg speak, read what Robert Ellis Mecklenburg has written, and watch what he has done to understand that he has the touch, taste, and nose of a wise one. He has quietly, yet persistently and strategically, filled our public health senses with a "good science, good sense" approach—starting with oral health, moving to health determinants, and then on to ethics and professionalism. This man,

named after his mother's and grandmother's maiden names (Robert and Ellis, respectively), has done this consistently over a career that has almost covered half a century. Actually, one can envision Meck's career in the context of Maslow's hierarchy—evolving from a focus on oral health, expanding to address health determinants (namely, tobacco), and reaching self-actualization by addressing ethics and professionalism (Figure 3).

Will Rogers has been credited with saying, "Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit

there." Meck, perhaps it is your characteristic of moving quickly on the right tracks that attracted you to trains and railroads? You have never been one to sit still. Together with Donna's support, you have led the public health community with God's speed, determination, and grace. We look forward to many more adventures and journeys ahead. It is truly an honor to join you on this occasion. We salute you, congratulate you, and thank you for your gentle and never-ending mentoring!

Stephen B. Corbin, DDS, MPH, Dean, Special Olympics University, Special Olympics, Inc.,

It is with great appreciation and humility that I stand here to make salutatory comments on behalf of Dr. Robert E. Mecklenburg, the 2001 recipient of the John W. Knutson Award—the highest recognition achievable in dental public health. It is also with great solemnity that I make these remarks. Donna Mecklenburg, Bob's partner for nearly 50 years and a wonderful friend to so many of us, passed away last week after a long and valiant fight against a disease that wracked her body, but never touched her spirit or her soul. Bob is here and we are here this evening because that is what Donna wanted. And Donna is here too, because the people she touched, including many here tonight, were changed for the long haul by their association with her.

While I am privileged to be one of the two persons selected by Dr. Mecklenburg to make formal remarks, there could have been scores of others if time permitted. Thus, I consider this role to be the second highest honor that one can achieve in dental public health—presenting the winner of the highest honor in dental public health. And how do we know that the Knutson Award is the highest honor in dental public health? Just check the list of past recipients—a veritable "Who's Who" in public health, let alone dentistry. That is a point particularly worth making. Dr. Mecklenburg, a 40+ year member of the American Public Health Association, has earned this distinction not purely because of his accomplishments in a specialty area of medicine—dentistry—but be-

cause of his broader accomplishments in public health. Numerous Knutson Award winners have demonstrated these same types of ecumenical accomplishments.

There are two things that I must do up front. First, despite the fact that this is a formal occasion, I will take the privilege of referring to Dr. Mecklenburg as Dr. Mecklenburg only two more times during my remarks. Consistent with my relationship with him from the beginning and the way in which so many others have known him, and with which he has been comfortable, I will use the more familiar Bob or "Meck." Second, it would be disingenuous of me to withhold my personal thanks to Bob until the close of my remarks. I have no doubt that Bob Mecklenburg is the individual who has had the greatest overall impact on my professional career. I am sure there are others who will say the same thing.

He taught me by "the book," but more importantly by example, how to be and act like a leader, and the difference between having a professional degree and being a true professional. While many people have influenced who I am professionally, Bob holds a singular place. For that I am eternally grateful. Second, Bob and his lovely wife Donna have touched my life and my family's life in ways that have made a big difference. This goes from consistent compassionate compatriot, to helping to secure a house and the adoption of a beautiful son, Derek. Bob and Donna, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

The printed program for this ceremony details the objective facts about Meck's career. In sheer number, scope, and level of responsibility, it is clear that he has been at the forefront of leadership within dentistry, dental public health, and public health for decades. Rather than repeat these details, I will instead touch upon a number of instances that I believe best characterize the consummate professional that we are honoring through a personal lens. Meck, this is the way that I remember it. If I am off base, please allow me some latitude.

I first became aware of Dr. Mecklenburg several weeks after reporting for duty as "the" dentist for the White Earth Indian Reservation in Northwest Minnesota in 1974. I happened across a publication, the *Indian Health Service Dental Program Newsletter*. Right at the front, there was a multiple-page article, densely packed, single-spaced, loaded with multisyllabic words and complex, run-on sentences. My recollection is that it was 11-point type (maybe 10-point) with no pictures and no illustrations. Being in the middle of nowhere, not yet knowing the nature of the program I had signed on for, I decided to plow through this newsletter starting with the lead article: "The View from Here." My first thought was, "Where the heck is here?" "Here" turned out to be Washington, DC—or, technically, Rockville, Maryland—the top of the food chain within the Indian Health Service Dental Program. I remember being both confused and stimulated by the article. I had never heard dentists say these

kinds of things before, have these kinds of ideas, dare to think about non-dental stuff. I read it again, possibly the only person to ever read a "View from Here" article more than once. I did not understand it much better the second time, but I remained stimulated and enthralled. This was a pattern that would continue.

Two years later I was selected to fill a new position as dental director for the Bemidji Program Area in the Indian Health Service—basically, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. This would cast me into a new relationship with Meck, as my direct report professional supervisor. My previous professional supervisor, Dr. Richard Baker, who had recommended me for this position, gleefully asked shortly after my selection whether I had spoken to Meck yet. He chuckled in response to my "no" answer and said that he would be interested in my reaction after talking to Meck. It became pretty clear to me that the senior dentists to whom Meck related in the Indian Health Service, or to whom he had related previously in the Public Health Service at large, had a Meck "fixination." I say "fixination" because it was a mixture of fixation—they never failed to talk about him—and fascination—he kept them guessing all of the time. Not on purpose though, most of them just could not seem to get it. There was no comfort zone, no routine. There were no good old boys, only good performing—yes, boys—and that part would change also. What I wish to cite, beyond Meck's inestimable intellect and penchant for scholarly debate, was his willingness to take risks, including risks with others. He took a risk in selecting, or at least allowing, me to lead the new program area. Meck consistently has been willing to take a chance at letting people reach to the heights of their potential, even if it could occasionally cause him some problems. I have been committed to this same approach with people whom I have selected, mentored, and guided along the way. I am sure this is because of Meck's model.

The next issue that stands out in my mind concerns the membership rules for the American Association of Public Health Dentistry (AAPHD), back in 1977. Up to that time, membership was open only to dentists. You didn't have to be a public health dentist, just a

dentist. Meck was president. He was determined to open up and expand the membership of the organization as a matter of sound organizational strategy, but also as a matter of equity for nondentists who clearly had much to contribute to public health dentistry. I remember acrimonious debate. I remember Meck standing before the business meeting seemingly alone, taking shot after shot from the more conservative wing of the organization. I recall aggressive, bordering on unprofessional, remarks made before the group and worse remarks made in the hallways—dire predictions that the specialty of dental public health could be lost. I remember Meck sticking to the professional issues, the high ground.

And finally, I remember Ric Bothwell standing up and expressing his frustration and disappointment with the bogus remarks that he characterized as a smokescreen for keeping dental hygienists from becoming members. Ric's admonition was to cut the filibuster and let people vote. I was proud of Meck and Ric. I was proud to be part of the Indian Health Service. I was glad Meck was my boss. And even though there was no assurance that Meck's position would prevail, he did not pressure his troops to vote either way. He made sure that we understood the issue, but he did not ask, "Can I count on your vote?" In this example, you can see some of Meck's strongest professional and leadership qualities. Where would AAPHD and dental public health be today if this had not come to pass?

Forward two years. I am ready to go to public health school. My boss in the Bemidji Region is not ready for me to go. So, I call up Meck to let him know that support for my public health training would not be forthcoming from the Area and that I was going to leave the Public Health Service, use my VA education benefits, and go to school on my own. His counsel was quick and to the point: "Don't do it." He asked whether I would be willing to take an interim assignment if he could figure out a way for me to get training support through the headquarters dental program. I agreed. Two years in Albuquerque and then to school. Within a few weeks the details were worked out. Meck had scrambled, made some deals, and kept his word.

There was another instance reflecting Meck's character that was not so easy. Meck was used to central budget control in the Indian Health Service. He was a master of budget management and leveraging—naysayers may have suggested manipulation, although I do not agree. Meck routinely and legitimately would tap new appropriations to support things like staff development and program research—those big ideas that he was so good at. In one instance, I had worked with several tribal groups to secure funds for new programs. The tribes had gone to Congress, testified, and received line item funding. They had planned exactly what they needed down to the dollar and were preparing to spend the money they had requested. I got a call from Meck telling me how much of a tap he was going to make on the money. I said that there was no room for a tap and besides he could not do it legally. I suggested that I could not stand by and support such an action, as the tribes would feel like the rug had been pulled out from under them. His advice, as in the previous example, was swift and clear: "Don't dare do it!" Only, in this instance, the emotions were running in a quite different direction. I felt that I had made a difficult, principled decision that might cost me my career in the PHS. The type of decision that Meck often mentored us about. A couple of hours later he called back and said, "You are right, I can't tap that money. I'll have to get it some other way." I don't think that he ever, even for a moment, held that occasion of insubordination against me. As he always did, he rose to the occasion. He did not have to call back at all, did not have to admit he was wrong, and did not have to let me off the hook. But he did. That spoke volumes to me about leadership.

Fast forward to 1981. Meck becomes the chief dental officer of the Public Health Service—a dark-horse selection, despite his distinguished career, because of a trait that I had mentioned before. He had not been a good-old-boy, not a go-along, get-along guy. He had always pressed the envelope. This was a critical juncture. The new surgeon general, Dr. C. Everett Koop, had endured a difficult Senate confirmation process, and really was given little support in the beginning, or the end, by the administration. He was pretty

much ignored for the first few months. Things such as travel money for the surgeon general, office space, and supplies for the chief dental officer were hard to come by.

Meck secured the continuity of the chief dental officer's office by literally creating the physical office himself, personally salvaging the records, historical and otherwise, that nearly went to the dumpster, and reaching out to establish high-level relationships: inside and outside of government, within dentistry and beyond, in the public and private sectors, and internationally as well as domestically. I believe that in carrying out all of these responsibilities, he may have been the most talented chief dental officer we have ever had. Meck immediately dedicated himself to supporting Dr. Koop every step of the way, including offering opportunities and travel support for Dr. Koop to appear as the nation's supreme public health figure. Meck worked with Dr. Koop on several high-level, complex public health issues, including smokeless tobacco and fluoride. Meck provided Dr. Koop a model for what a chief professional officer could be and, in the process, earned the Surgeon General's Medalion, the highest honor that the surgeon general can bestow.

I would be remiss not to mention the gracious hospitality that Donna and Bob extended to so many people, including scores of foreign visitors, at their home, on so many occasions. I never could understand how they got it all done and looked so calm when the guests arrived, although I suspect

that Donna was in charge on those occasions.

Fast forward again to 1987. Meck completes his term as chief dental officer and assistant surgeon general. I am reminded of that Bing Crosby/Danny Kaye movie, where Bing sings to Dean Jagger "What do you do with a general, when a general's not a general...." Meck clearly had earned the right to retire on his laurels. Of course, we all know that he did not. He simply reinvented himself as a top international leader in a critical area of public health: tobacco policy, cessation, and control. Virtually single-handedly, he has led the drive to get dentists and dentistry involved in this issue in the proper way. This has included consulting with numerous organizations as to their tobacco policies and helping them to develop new ones, developing and leading the National Dental Tobacco-free Steering Committee for the National Cancer Institute, and training thousands of health professionals through hundreds of courses and seminars about tobacco addiction, prevention, and cessation. He has essentially brought the area of tobacco control alive for dentistry and, in that regard, elevated the status of dentistry and dental public health globally. He still toils industriously in this area. Recently, he received awards from the C. Everett Koop Foundation and American Lung Association, as well as Oral Health America, recognizing his work on tobacco. These are in addition to scores of other awards and recognitions that he has received in his career.

Should we hold Meck up as a standard? No, because too few could realistically reach such heights. Can we put him forward as a model of a professional life well lived? Absolutely! The view from here is one of awesome respect and appreciation. Even more so that he carries forth with passion, integrity, and commitment to the same degree now that he always has, even at this senior stage of his career. Even at the point of his receiving the John Knutson Award, Meck likely has many more things to show us. I asked him a few weeks ago if had he ever met John Knutson and what his strongest impressions were. He said that he had met Knutson briefly as a young dental intern. All he could recall was that when Knutson came into a room, everyone knew it. He commanded attention and respect. I think that we can say the same for Dr. Robert E. Mecklenburg, but with Meck there is so much more.

That is why in the printed version of my remarks I refer to him as "chief dental officer" in lower case letters. For, beyond those of us who served with him while he was the Chief Dental Officer of the Public Health Service, we all have served with him in the larger public health mission, with him as our "chief dental officer." The remaining chapters of this story remain to be written.

Congratulations, Meck, and thank you for letting me play a personal role in this fantastic evening. And thank you, Donna, for allowing all of us such unfailing access to Meck's time and talents.