

## 2003 AAPHD Distinguished Service Award: Lois K. Cohen, PhD

**Presented by William R. Maas, DDS, MPH**

The AAPHD Distinguished Service Award is presented to an individual in recognition of excellent and distinguished service to public health dentistry. This year's recipient is Dr. Lois Ruth Kushner Cohen. Dr. Cohen is associate director for international health at the National Institute for Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR) and director of its World Health Organization Collaborating Center for Epidemiology, Prevention, and Treatment of Oral Diseases and Conditions.

With the exception of Helen Doherty, who with her husband, Joe, received the Distinguished Service Award following her long service in the AAPHD national office, Dr. Cohen is the first person to receive this award who did not begin his or her professional career as a dentist or dental hygienist. That says a lot about her distinct brilliance and unique service to public health dentistry.

We in dental public health would like to think that our efforts are science-based. Much of what we understand and do is informed by epidemiology. But what has been our source for scientific understanding of the implications of or methods to change knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors among the public and health care providers?

Throughout her long and distinguished career, Lois Cohen has guided development of the social science base for things we know to be critical—such as how providers respond to innovation, and the attitudes and behaviors of the public on such issues as community water fluoridation, personal health, and prepaid dental care. By personally conducting research, providing leadership to the field, and executing administrative responsibilities within, first, the Division of Dental Health and, recently, the NIDCR, Dr. Cohen has guided the science base for us to proceed from a vantage point that transcends our own biases and personal experience.



*Drs. William R. Maas and Lois K. Cohen*

It is our good fortune—and the public's, too—that within a year of earning her PhD in sociology from Purdue University, Lois was working as a social science analyst at the Division of Dental Health in the US Public Health Service (PHS) in Washington, DC. With the exception of some extended visits in her capacity as visiting lecturer in social medicine and health policy at the Harvard Medical School, her entire career has been with the PHS. Rather than serving as an insular term of employment, it has been quite the opposite. She is well known for her long-standing service to international health by leadership of and consultation to committees of the Fédération Dentaire Internationale since 1970.

She was instrumental in assuring the conduct of both World Health Organization International Collaborative Studies of oral health, through which we learned that public expectations, public health interventions, and public and provider attitudes about prevention better explained variation in health status across the world than did differences in dental care delivery systems.

Dr. Cohen's service on editorial boards and on committees of professional associations and intergovernmental efforts are too numerous and distinguished to enumerate. But it is also important to note what one of the AAPHD members shared with the selection committee in nominating her

for the award: "Early in my career I had a public health problem, and someone suggested that I call Lois Cohen for advice and gave me her phone number. She was so helpful and generous with her time and attention.

Only later did I learn about her distinguished background and heavy responsibilities at NIDCR's extramural research program. But she never let on. I will never forget how collegially helpful she was to someone who was

hardly in the same league as her professionally. But that's just how she is."

For excellence and service to public health dentistry, I am pleased to present the AAPHD Distinguished Service Award to Dr. Lois Cohen.

---

## Remarks on Receiving the 2003 AAPHD Distinguished Service Award

---

**Lois K. Cohen, PhD**

How can I respond adequately to the kindness of your comments about my career in public health in service to the oral health of our national and international communities? It is I who need to thank all of you who accepted me as part of the team of players throughout these years. After all, I was one of many social and behavioral scientists who was invited to join the staff of the Division of Dental Public Health and Resources in 1964 to assist in the many challenges facing the public health service in those days: acceptance by dentists of early detection of oral cancer diagnoses methods; acceptance by the public and its decision makers of community water fluoridation; assessment of oral health personnel needs for the United States in the days of supply shortages and maldistribution; the challenge of developing models for the enhancement of the nation's health, which included appropriate oral health delivery systems;

and other issues related to the transfer of the products of research to practitioners, educators, administrators, or directly to the public.

What has been characteristic of our community of oral health professionals is the early recognition that these issues require many talents and perspectives. And it is the value-added benefits which allow some creative "out-of-the-box" thinking, which may not be so characteristic of other professions. But those team approaches are exactly what are needed today and in the future as they allow transdisciplinary insights to emerge ... different in kind from those that can be generated from any single discipline, but at the same time enriched by all the participating disciplinary perspectives. To me, this trait augers well for the future of the dental public health enterprise in the United States and globally. Similarly, we needed to look beyond our geographic borders for models of oral

health systems, learning from cultures and countries that have had a longer experience than we have had. Recognizing that there are lessons to be learned and shared globally demonstrates the leadership of this community in the world of dentistry and public service.

For all those wonderful characteristics that this community possesses, I thank you for letting me participate as a full member of the team, sometimes as a team player ... sometimes as a team leader, but always as a colleague among respected colleagues. From the bottom of my heart, I am touched by this award and what is signifies to be counted among you. Thanks again.

*[Editor's Note: Dr. Cohen declined to receive the \$1,000 cash prize associated with this award. Instead, the funds were deposited in the AAPHD Foundation in her honor.]*