

## The John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award in Dental Public Health—2002 Recipient Esther Colchamiro

**David I. Rosenstein, DMD, MPH, Professor and Chair, Department of Community Dentistry, Oregon Health and Science University, School of Dentistry**

Exactly 20 years ago, the first John Knutson Award was presented to David Ast. Ironically, I was the chair of the then Dental Health Section, which is now the Oral Health Section, and was honored to present Dr. Ast with the award. Since that time, the most influential people in the field of dental public health have received this award. All were giants in the field, some were legend. We had an individual almost solely responsible for the resurrection of the AAPHD. We had deans of dental schools. We had pioneers. We had one dentist who refused to allow his superiors, during World War II, to have him provide a lower standard of care to African-American soldiers. He then was made to spend the rest of the war in the trenches, on the front lines. We have honored people from all backgrounds and all personalities.

It is now time to honor Dr. Esther Colchamiro. We do so for her accomplishments. We do so for her determination. We do so for the 60 years she has spent striving to make this a better world for all dental patients, but for children in particular. And finally, we do so for the grace and dignity she has taught us through her example. Sixty years, and she has no plans to stop. Sixty years is approximately twice as long as any of us in this room plan to devote to caring for the public, and is longer than all but a handful of us have lived.

It might be easy for those of us in this room who graduated in the past decade to view Dr. Colchamiro's career. Relatively recent graduates have only heard stories about how difficult it was for a young woman to get started in this field. Our beloved Esther, and with all due reverence, I would like to refer to her hereafter as Esther, suffered enormously, but in silence, as she pursued her career with diligence and a grace most of us will



*Dr. Esther Colchamiro*

never know.

Esther was one of two women to graduate from Tufts University's Dental School, early during World War II. She was not the best student in her class of 56 students. She was second best. She did present the class oration, entitled, appropriately enough considering her career, "Success Through Ideals." She then went to work, treating children at the Guggenheim Dental Clinic, for the princely sum of \$125 per month. She was to work with children at this clinic for 25 years, enough for a career, well done. Esther trained young dentists from all over the world, who would come to the famous Guggenheim Clinic. After 25 years, when she should have been named chairperson, she was passed over because she was a woman. She was, however, offered an apology.

Esther then decided to specialize. At this point in her career, she had worked 25 years, and could have retired. Instead, she sought a new field, and fortunately for us in general, and residents of New York in particular, she chose public health dentistry, re-

ceiving her MPH from Columbia University. Upon completion of her degree, she became the assistant director of the Medicaid Dental Program for New York City. A daunting task she performed diligently, until the Medicaid office was taken over by the state. If one is counting, she had been working now, as a dentist, for 36 years.

This would be plenty for anyone, but not enough for Esther. She decided at this point to expand her responsibilities. She then became part of the New York City Evaluation Unit in the Office of Professional Standards and Review. Here her role was expanded to include the evaluation of all ambulatory care units, including community health centers, prisons, and agencies with contracts for providing care, and this include all health care, not just dental care.

I won't tell you how old she was when she began a career in academic dentistry, but I will tell you she has been at New York University's School of Dentistry for over 20 years. She has had so many responsibilities there that it is hard to enumerate. Some of her duties included developing a sealant program for homeless children. Knowing Esther, it is easy to imagine the pleasure she derived from helping a population of children who have so many obstacles to overcome. She was director of quality assurance. She advised a homeless program regarding dental care. She was involved in a prenatal and perinatal program.

This is not Esther's first award. She is a Fellow of the American College of Dentists. She is a Fellow of the American Society for Geriatric Dentistry—her expertise clearly extends to both ends of the age spectrum. She was a trustee for the American Fund for Dental Health. She received the Distinguished Service Award from Columbia University. She received the Lucy Hobbs Taylor Award from the American Association of Women Den-

tists. She received the Humanitarian Award from the Academy of General Dentistry. She received the Meritorious Service Award at the 125th Anniversary of Tufts University's School of Dental Medicine. She was also a leader in Girl Scouts, providing young women with a role model second to none.

Finally, no tribute to our dear Esther Colchamiro would be complete without some mention of her husband of 55

years, Ralph. We all have seen him diligently and patiently waiting for Esther to exit a session. We all know that Esther is unique among us for attending as many sessions as are provided. Ralph is always a step or two behind Esther, patiently carrying all the educational material she can gather, at the exhibit booths.

Esther and Ralph have been a team for 55 years. Esther has been a beacon of light in our field since the day she entered it. She carries herself with a

grace and dignity we can only strive to achieve. And finally, she is determined. Determined and dedicated to helping those individuals, particularly the most vulnerable, the children, who live in the shadow of life.

We honor her today with the John Knutson Award and dream that someday we might be able to accomplish enough that we can achieve half of what she has achieved. We love and honor Esther Colchamiro.

### **John P. Brown, BDS, PhD, Professor and Chair, Department of Community Dentistry, University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio**

I would like to make a tribute to Dr. Esther Colchamiro's earlier professional years. She graduated from Tufts College Dental School in 1942, became a Guggenheim intern, and for each of the next 24 years at the Guggenheim Dental Clinic in New York City taught a graduate clinical fellowship program for 75 dentists and 25 allied health professionals. They came from 25 countries.

Until the late 1960s, the Guggenheim Dental Clinic in New York City offered dental graduate training to dentists from the United States, Central and South America, and the Indian subcontinent. Some of these dentists proceeded on to dental practice and teaching careers in the United States, and many returned to practice in their home countries—all with the benefit of the Guggenheim experience. As trainees they all served the needs of low-income New York City school-children, who were bussed into the Guggenheim Clinic.

I did not know Esther during her time at the Guggenheim. I probably met her in 1983 at my first APHA meeting in Dallas. This was during her third and present career, as a faculty member at New York University. Her second career from 1967–81 was with the New York City Department of Health, where she rose to be director, and administrator of the New York City Medicaid Program. My knowledge of Esther's first career and of the Guggenheim Clinic came from association with some of her former students at the Eastman Dental Center in Rochester, NY. They took me on a tour of the facility in 1965. In this faculty capacity, Esther served dental profes-

sional education for the United States and the developing world, while she provided dental services to needy city children. Remember, the mid-1960s was the height of the caries epidemic; fluoridation only began in New York City in 1965, and the challenge seemed overwhelming. But not to Esther!

For us to understand Esther's first 25 years in graduate education, the environment needs some explanation. Although in those years the concepts of limitation of dental practice and dental specialties existed, the system of accreditation of graduate dental education under US Department of Education guidelines did not develop until the very end of Esther's years at the Guggenheim, in the late 1960s. There were far fewer graduate programs in dental schools, hospitals, the Forsyth and Eastman dental dispensaries, and at the Guggenheim Dental Clinic. The programs lacked official national standing as we know it, and were extremely dependent on the local institutional funding, enthusiasm, and development such as Esther and others supplied. Remember, there was no Medicaid program either, so graduate training also lacked this income support. Graduate dental education and training must have been much more difficult than it is today, when we have national guidelines, standards, and support.

Murray Guggenheim founded the Murray and Leonie Guggenheim Dental Clinic in New York City. He had made a fortune in copper mining, and then bought into Chilean nitrate mining, used in weapons production. The nitrate market failed after the First World War. During his last rather em-

bittered years, the Dental Clinic became his passion. It is said he would stand in the ornate entrance hall and watch the New York Board of Education buses unload the children, mostly blacks, Hispanics, Italian and Lower Westside Russian-Jewish immigrant children. He regretted that he could not be even more generous to the dental clinic. Murray Guggenheim died in 1939.

So the paradox was that the decline in the trade of weapons of war also negatively impacted public dental care in New York City. Murray's son Edmund, said by one biographer to be excellent at sports, ran the foundation after his father's death; however, it proved too much for him. He had inherited greater wealth than any of the Guggenheims; but against his deceased father's wishes, he transferred the Murray and Leonie Guggenheim Foundation to Mt. Sinai Hospital, the Mayo Clinic, New York Hospital, and five other hospitals. The Guggenheim Dental Clinic closed in the late 1960s. This must have been a bitter moment for Esther. She had devoted one normal professional lifetime to serve this institution. But she was undaunted, and began studying for the MPH degree at Columbia University.

It is said that the Guggenheim Dental Clinic ceased to exist because Medicaid was by then taking care of children's dental care through this new program. Of course Medicaid was not, and is not, a reason to no longer need philanthropic contributions to dental public health. How was it that this endowment for oral health of poor New York City children was allowed to be diverted against the wishes of the

benefactor? In retrospect, that seems a most unfortunate decision.

Esther continues to have a very long, varied, and productive professional life following her 25 years at the Guggenheim Clinic: 14 years with New York City Department of Health, and now 21 years and counting with New York University. That is an outstanding and almost unbelievable 60 years of educational and public health service.

She and I both took the ABDPIH exams in 1994. I felt rather overwhelmed

at this rather belated formal testing of my dental public health skills, having spent 25 years in the academic life. This was not so long compared with Esther's three careers and over twice that number of years to that point, and she was a great inspiration to the whole group of us as candidates. We referred to ourselves collectively as "The Kokopellis" after the Native American folk character who became the symbol for that International Year of Oral Health. In retrospect, we might have called ourselves the "Colchamiro."

I would say Esther remains an inspiration to us all in dental public health, because if there is a set of characteristics we need in this field it is endurance, persistence, and the ability to be creative and adaptive over the long haul. She has done all of this with grace. It is most fitting that Esther Kaplan Colchamiro receive the John W. Knutson Award for 2002.

#### Reference

1. Davis JH. *The Guggenheims, 1848-1988: an American epic*. New York: Shapolsky Publishing, 1988.

## Remarks on Receiving the John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award

**Stephen Colchamiro, DMD, on behalf of Esther Colchamiro, DMD, MPH**

I am truly honored to be accepting this award for Esther; but to be honest, I would prefer not to be here. I would much prefer to be sitting where you are—sitting, watching my aunt receive this wonderful prestigious award. I will be very brief, but Esther would have been even briefer. She would have modestly come up here, said thank you, and then given out her home-baked cookies to everyone. As David so beautifully described, that is her way of doing things ... quietly, efficiently, and with enormous results.

For many of my early years in dentistry, I did not know about Esther's accomplishments. She would ask about and take pride in my work and accomplishments, but would not talk much about her achievements. But then I would run into people all over the country—David in Oregon, Jack Dillenberg, the new dean in Arizona, Sue in Minneapolis, and of course Myron Allukian in Boston—and they would tell me, "Oh, I just saw your aunt in Phoenix (or Houston, or wherever). She's incredible," and then go

on to talk about her. It's only through others that I learned about her great work.

I also learned about the Guggenheim Clinic, and how the influence of dentists on a philanthropic family spawned the creation of the largest dental public health treatment program in the history of the country. It provided over 225,000 patient visits in its peak year of 1958, over 1,000 visits per day, and 5 million visits during its 36 years of operation. Just as importantly, the clinic created generations of

### Call for Nominations JOHN W. KNUTSON DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD IN DENTAL PUBLIC HEALTH

Nominations are requested for the John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award, which is conferred at the annual American Public Health Association meeting, based on the following criteria: a distinguished career in dental public health, leadership in the profession, and significant accomplishments. Nominees may have had public health careers at the local, state, national, or international level in dental public health practice, academia, the military, business, or industry, and will be a present or past member of APHA. Previous recommendations may be resubmitted. To nominate for the 2003 award, submit a curriculum vitae or biographical information and letter(s) of recommendation regarding the candidate by April 15, 2003, to: John P. Brown, BDS, PhD Chair, APHA Oral Health Section Awards Committee, UTHSCSA, Department of Community Dentistry, 7703 Floyd Curl Drive, MC 7917, San Antonio, TX 78229-3900. E-mail: brown@uthscsa.edu. Tel.: 210-567-3200.