

## AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION

# The John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award in Dental Public Health – 2004 Recipient: Dr. Charles W. Gish, DDS, MSD

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Good Evening! And, welcome to the 23rd annual John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award in Dental Public Health, sponsored by the Oral Health Section of the American Public Health Association. It is truly a pleasure to introduce Dr. Gish. I must forewarn you that I do not know Chuck as well as I have known other recipients of this award who I have had the pleasure of introducing. What that means is, I cannot be naughty. Although I tried diligently, no one I spoke with while trying to dig up a little dirt would spill the beans about Chuck Gish. Thus, this introduction will be mostly a toast and little or no roast.

The first time I met Dr. Gish was shortly after the U.S. Public Health Service hired me in the late 1960's. This first meeting took place during the annual session of the American Association of Public Health Dentists—the first of many that I attended. I was so new (green) to dental public health that I didn't even recognize that I was among some of the most prestigious leaders in dental public health. Imagine this neophyte at the same luncheon table with Dave Striffler, Wes Young, Harry Bruce, Frank Law, John Peterson and Chuck Gish. Head Start was just getting underway, which is why I was hired, so as I recall I was able to carry on a bit of a conversation with these public health stars. At the time I didn't have a clue just how important state dental directors are. (Yes, Larry and Myron, local dental directors *also* are important). Fortunately, I had two excellent mentors, Bob Hansen and Bob Weiss, who insisted that I visit several states to learn about their dental public health programs, especially

Head Start. I quickly learned just how valuable state dental directors were and are, and about their pivotal contributions to improving American's oral health.

We are here tonight to honor a former state dental director of Indiana. Allow me to provide you with a glimpse of where this year's recipient, Dr. Charles W. Gish, came from. His entry into dental public health is both interesting and educational, and his contributions to improving oral health for thousands of Indianans are truly inspiring.

Charles W. Gish was born in Camden, Indiana in 1923. Camden is where he spent his childhood and graduated from high school. In 1942 he enrolled at Purdue University as a pre-med student and, as many young men did at the time, signed up for the ROTC. In 1943 he found himself in Navy boot camp as a dental corpsman. With the end of World War II, he was released from the Navy as an inactive reservist. He then went to dental school. He graduated from the University of Indiana Dental School with honors in 1949. Shortly after that he and Treva married, and by 1956 they had three children: Bradley, Tracey and Gail. Treva and Tracey Gish Simmerman and her son, Jared, are here with us tonight.

Meanwhile, Dr. Gish was very busy on the dental front. From 1952-1954 he was in the U.S. Public Health Service, where he served as the USPHS Region IX Dental Consultant. In this capacity he conducted numerous dental surveys of school-aged children. Remember, many men who volunteered for or who were drafted into the military service for WW II were not accepted because of their poor

oral health status. Further, this was an era of rampant decay among children, and we were just learning about the value of fluorides in preventing dental caries. Thus, conducting oral examinations of school-aged children was a pivotal aspect of a community's oral health needs assessment.

In 1954 Dr. Gish became the Assistant Dental Director for Indiana. He served in this capacity until 1962. In this role he initiated the first Indiana school-based neutral sodium fluoride treatment program for 2<sup>nd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. Operator-applied applications of neutral sodium fluoride for students in these grades were considered state-of-the-art public health in areas where community water fluoridation was not possible.

Dr. Gish was named Indiana State Dental Director in 1962 and continued in that position until 1985. Through his efforts, Indiana became legendary for its robust programs of fluoride. Under his direction, Indiana had and still has one of the highest percentages of its population with central water supplies fluoridated. In addition, for rural communities where community water fluoridation was not possible he implemented numerous school-water fluoridation units. In fact, at one time he had more schools that were fluoridated than any other state in the country. He also directed a mobile dental clinic that traveled around the state to provide exams and treatment for school-aged children.

Now this wasn't all that he did. Because he was living in Indiana and connected with the University dental school, he also worked with Joseph Muller, who was more or less the father of stannous fluoride. You will

recall that Crest originally contained stannous fluoride rather than sodium fluoride. In addition to being a primary clinical examiner evaluating Crest, Chuck worked with Dr. Muller to develop a preventive prophylaxis paste containing stannous fluoride that was used by dental practitioners until relatively recently. This prophylaxis paste also was used extensively in the military. The product has been off the market for nearly two decades, but it has been less than a decade since I had my last inquiry regarding the prophylaxis paste. Invariably I would get calls about the time school started, asking, "Where can I buy fluoride dental prophylaxis paste?" Mainly, these calls came from dental hygienists working in schools.

This product also was developed into a self-applied fluoride regimen, generally referred to as a "brush-in." In Indiana and ultimately across the nation annually hundreds of school-aged children would be herded onto a playground or football field to brush with this stuff simultaneously. Unfortunately, it tasted horrible! And, the end results were dubious.

Hersh and colleagues did some research on this product both in the U. S. and in Brazil. It didn't taste any better in Brazil. Once, I will never forget, Hersh received a letter from a school nurse who recruited and or-

ganized students for this treatment regimen. The challenge was that once students had had a treatment it was difficult to get some of them to comply with subsequent treatments. The school nurse asked if there was anything that could be done about the wretched taste. Hersh responded by explaining that they couldn't add flavoring agents to change the taste, which was true at the time. Later, industry was able to add flavor to stannous fluoride without altering its effectiveness. To which she replied, "Well, I guess we will just have to try harder (to recruit students), anything that tastes that bad MUST be GOOD!" In addition to being an *avant-garde* state dental director, Dr. Gish also held many elected and appointed positions in both ASTDD and the AAPHD. He also has been awarded many honors over his career both from these two organizations as well as from the State of Indiana and the University of Indiana.

Like most of us, he also has another life. For example, for years he has owned a large acreage and raised both Black Angus and Hereford cattle. We could not find any pictures of Black Angus, so you have to settle for these guys who are of mixed origin. Dr. Gish, like so many other public health folks, is an avid collector. He collects Native American artifacts.

But, he is not satisfied to only collect. He has become very knowledgeable about them and in turn he shares this information with students in local schools in Indiana. I am certain that one of the first things he and his family did when they arrived in Washington was to head for our new Native American Museum. His other hobby, besides raising cattle and collecting Indian relics, is fishing! Anywhere! On land, on sea, you name it! He likes to fish. Last summer he won first prize for catching the largest bluegill in the pond on their property.

In closing, I must share with you, that shortly before Hersh died I tried to think of all kinds of things to talk to him about. Some of these items, of course, were about dental public health. Once thing I asked him was if he thought Chuck Gish was a likely candidate for the Knutson Distinguished Service Award. Without hesitation he said "Yes, by all means."

Dr. Gish, you have distinguished yourself time and time again, in dental public health. You have helped thousands of children in Indiana become adults with healthy dentitions. Thank you, Chuck, for all that you have contributed and congratulations on receiving this most prestigious award. You are most deserving.

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## Remarks on Receiving the 2004 APHA Knutson Award

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### Dr. Charles W. Gish, DDS, MSD

Thank you Alice, for that wonderful introduction. You always do so many great things and give the credit to others. Also, thank you Dr. Presson and Jane Steffensen for your comments. And, a very special thanks to Colgate Palmolive and Kay Quick for your support of APHA and the awards program. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Alice, you introduced my wife, Treva, daughter Tracey and grandson Jared – I might add that we had our 55<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary last June.

The John Knutson Award is a very special honor for me. I knew John personally and we worked on many of the same type fluoride studies although Dr. Knutson was a few years ahead of me. I might give you one specific incidence with Dr. Knutson and me:

I was a dental corpsman in the navy during World War II and at the end of 1945 when the war was over, I was released to inactive duty in the Naval Reserve. I went through dental school and after graduation, the

Korean War was on the horizon and I thought I'd be called to active duty. The dental school and the State Board of Health both wanted me to stay and do research and public health, so I did. In April of 1952, Dr. Knutson called and said, "Chuck, where are you?" I said, "Here at the State Board of Health, Why?" He said "You're supposed to report to San Francisco at the USPHS Regional Office today for duty, didn't you get orders?" I said "No." He said, "That darn Dr. Burney, he tore your orders up since