William H. Foege, MD, MPH

Recipient of the 2007 Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Award for Humanitarian Contributions to the Health of Humankind

William H. Foege, MD, MPH has been called a giant in his field, the embodiment of dedication and achievement in the improvement of public health world wide. In recognition of his work he is this year's recipient of the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Award for Humanitarian Contributions to the Health of Humankind.

Dr. Foege received his medical degree from the University of Washington in 1961. After graduation Dr. Foege interned at the US Public Health Service Hospital on Staten Island in New York and then became an officer in the Epidemic Intelligence Service at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In 1965 he received a Master's degree in public health from Harvard.

As a teenager, Dr. Foege had been inspired by reading about Albert Schweitzer's medical missionary work in Africa and his principle of reverence for life. He resolved that he, as did Dr. Schweitzer, would minister to the health needs of the world's poor. "One measure of civilization is how well we treat the most vulnerable members of our society," he says.

Dr. Foege's opportunity to fulfill his goal occurred the year after he obtained his public health degree. In 1966 he went to Yahe in the eastern part of Nigeria to run a Lutheran church mission medical center. He was asked by the CDC if he would consult on a twenty county CDC Lutheran church mission medical center. He was asked by the CDC if he would consult on a twenty county CDC epidemic control and prevention program. In 1966 he received a master's degree in public health from Harvard.

When it mounted its smallpox eradication campaign. In 1970 Dr. Foege returned to the US and joined the CDC where he headed the agency's smallpox eradication program. Initially his strategy of surveillance and containment was received with widespread skepticism. "A cracked-brain scheme completely out of touch with reality," said one critic. But Dr. Foege "has a great talent for coming up with creative ideas and presenting them in a way that doesn't threaten people," says William Watson, a former deputy director at the CDC. Dr. Foege says that to be a successful leader in public health one has to know how to build successful coalitions.

Dr. Foege's efforts at coalition building paid off. Despite his own skepticism Dr. Donald Hopkins, at the time a CDC physician in Sierra Leone, decided to give the "cracked-brain" scheme a try. Within nine months, with less than 70% of the population vaccinated, smallpox had vanished.

Over the next few years in almost every area where smallpox occurred and the strategy of surveillance and containment was applied to immunization efforts the disease was eradicated. The World Health Organization also initially skeptical, eventually adopted the strategy when it mounted its smallpox eradication campaign.

In 1977 the last case of smallpox in the world occurred in Somalia. That same year Dr. Foege became director of the CDC. He took over at a time of major changes in the agency. CDC programs were being expanded to include not just infectious disease surveillance and control but also population studies, environmental and occupational health, violence, and injuries. This expansion came at a price, Dr. Foege notes. When dealing with infectious diseases effective measures can be mounted if they are based on the best available science. But in this larger public health arena this is not always possible. There are many examples.

One example Dr. Foege cites occurred in 1980. There were an increasing number of reports of a rare but serious illness affecting the blood, liver, and brain of children and adolescents up to 16 years of age. The disorder, first identified in 1963 by Australian pathologist Dr. Douglas Reye, is now known as Reye's syndrome. In four or five studies, CDC investigators linked the condition to the use of aspirin among children recovering from viral infections such as influenza or chickenpox. Although the studies were too small to show statistical validity, "there was no question that the findings were valid," says Dr. Foege. He called for a warning notice on aspirin containers.

Aspirin manufacturers protested to the Reagan White House, which ordered further studies before deciding...
on any warnings. The CDC nevertheless published the studies, and at the same time noted that definitive in-
formation had yet to be obtained. In fact, the later stud-
ies showed that the original findings were incorrect. How-
ever, it was not until 1986, three years after Dr. Foege left the CDC, that the warning finally appeared.

Recounting this experience Dr. Foege argues that
while the CDC must continue to base its decisions on the
best science it can muster, there are inevitably factors
beyond the science that will contribute to public policy
decisions. “Every public health decision rests on a political decision,” he says. In a
talk he gave a few years ago to the Associa-
tion of State and Territorial Health Offi-
cers, he urged his audience to become in-
volved in politics, to use their positions as
health officials to make the political system
work for social justice and so influence
the system to make the right public health
decisions.

In 1984, while he was professor of international
health at Emory University in Atlanta Dr. Foege, along
with several other colleagues, formed what became the
Task Force for Child Survival and Development, a World
Health Organization working group with the aim,
consisting of the Carter Center. Started by Presi-
dent Jimmy Carter in 1982 in partnership with Emory
University, the Center is committed to advancing human
rights and alleviating unnecessary human suffering.

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By the turn of the century Dr. Foege planned to retire
to his home on Vashon Island in the Seattle area. How-
ever, Bill Gates asked him to become Senior Medical Ad-
visor to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to work
on the Foundation’s unprecedented health initiatives, and
to advise the Foundation on strategies that
could be usefully pursued in global health. Mr. Gates says that Dr. Foege had alerted
him to the potential social impact of the funds the Foundation was spending, and
suggested he read the 1993 World Develop-
ment Report which quantifies the toll of dis-
ease in developing countries. For Mr. Gates
the report was an eye opener.

“Working with the Gates Foundation is very reward-
ing because it has totally changed the field of global
health,” said Dr. Foege in a 2001 interview with Dr. Allen
Rosenfield, Dean of the Mailman School of Public
Health at Columbia University. “They have given about
600 million dollars a year for global health ... but it’s not
just the money, it’s the hope that’s been engendered
among those who have worked all their lives on a shoe-
string,” Dr. Foege says. “This is a wonderful time in
global health.”

Dr. Foege is now a Fellow at The Bill and Melinda
Gates Foundation. He continues his involvement with
many organizations, including the Carter Center, the
Marguerite Casey Foundation Board, the Global Health
Council, and the Rockefeller Foundation. Dr. Foege has
been a Fellow of the American Association for the Ad-
vancement of Science since 1991 and a Fellow of the So-
ciety of Behavioral Medicine since 1999.

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The Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Award for Humanitarian Contributions to the Health of Humankind is presented by the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases (NFID) to individuals
whose outstanding humanitarian efforts and achieve-
ments have contributed significantly to improving the health of humankind. Criteria on which selection is
based include:

- Legislative or administrative contributions;
- Humanitarian service; and/or
- Public education activities.

The Award is named for former President and Mrs.
Carter, who as outstanding humanitarians, have worked
tirelessly to improve the quality of life for people world-
wide. They are co-founders of The Carter Center, a non-
profit, nonpartisan organization based in Atlanta and ded-
icated to improving the quality of life for people.
Through their work at The Carter Center, President and
Mrs. Carter have worked to resolve conflict peacefully,
promote democracy, protect human rights, and prevent
and eradicate disease.

The Award, crafted by Steuben, signifies fine Ameri-
can craftsmanship, much as the Carters have signified
outstanding Americans. The elegant three-dimensional
glass sculpture, designed by Steuben, contains NFID’s
symbol, the double helix. The Award is underwritten by
a grant from Wyeth Pharmaceuticals.