

Jennifer L. Howse, PhD

RECIPIENT OF THE 2010 JIMMY AND ROSALYNN CARTER
HUMANITARIAN AWARD

Through the leadership of Jennifer L. Howse since 1990, the March of Dimes has made the world a safer place for people of all ages. She is recognized for her efforts as the 2010 recipient of the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Humanitarian Award.

Working hand-in-hand with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Dr. Howse and the March of Dimes established a nationwide Folic Acid Education Campaign. As a result, according to Damian Braga, president of Sanofi Pasteur US, there has been a 50 percent increase in awareness of folic acid among women of childbearing age, and the Food and Drug Administration was convinced to add folic acid to the nation's grain supply. Now that more women are receiving folic acid in their diet, Mr. Braga reports, neural tube birth defects have been reduced annually by one-third.

In 2003, Dr. Howse and the March of Dimes initiated a

campaign to stem the rise in premature births in the United States. According to Mr. Braga, these education efforts resulted in a 56 percent increase in awareness of the seriousness of premature birth among women of childbearing age and a 34 percent uptick in awareness among the general public. "The rate of premature birth, which has increased 30 percent since 1981, may now be leveling off according to preliminary 2007 birth data," Mr. Braga says.

The March of Dimes under Dr. Howse has provided funding for important research into birth defects, premature birth and basic developmental biology. Since 2005, the Prematurity Research Initiative, the Basil O'Connor Scholar Program, and basic research grants have totaled over \$134 million in grants to scientists making advances in the etiology of preterm deliveries, and understanding early human development.

With Dr. Howse at the helm, the March of Dimes has developed new resources—such as a comprehensive website—to help mothers have healthier babies. The March of Dimes site contains up-to-date medical and scientific information, as well as practical tips, for expectant moms. On the site, health information specialists answer emails in both English and Spanish. And pregnant women can register to receive daily text messages with healthy prenatal suggestions. The site also features on-demand podcasts that address various health information subjects.

In addition, the March of Dimes has awarded millions





of dollars in grants each year to local organizations focused on maternal health and child health. The grants enable more women to get prenatal care, stop smoking and receive services that lead to healthy birth outcomes.

Dr. Jennifer L. Howse “is the ultimate champion for the needs of moms and infants and she has inspired the dedication and support of her staff and volunteers alike,” Mr. Braga says. “She has made an outstanding contribution to

the health of humankind.”

Born in Glendale, California, Dr. Howse grew up in many places. Her father was a career military officer in the Air Force and her mother was a housewife and community volunteer. Dr. Howse has a younger sister, Debb. “My family moved quite often,” she says. “When I was six years old, we moved to Athens, Greece and from there to Wichita, Kansas: from the Parthenon to waving fields of wheat!”

A bookish kid, Dr. Howse loved to read adventure stories, especially about horses. “I worked really hard in class; since I attended seven different schools growing up, there was always a lot of change and catching up,” she recalls. “When I turned eleven years old, we were living in Valdosta, Georgia, and my parents got me a horse – they must have thought I would turn into a book, if I didn’t get outdoors more.”

She points to two early experiences that taught her “what it means to play for keeps in life—about the importance of serious and permanent decisions, actions and events.”

When she was nine, “my mother had a life-threatening cancer. She made good choices and survived—87 today—but her surgery and treatment shook our family and underscored the fragility and preciousness of life. Later, as a teenager, I witnessed first hand the terrible unfairness of life in the segregated Deep South—and came to understand the importance of standing up for what you believe in and for social justice.”

Based on her performance in her Valdosta High senior class play, “The Diary of Anne Frank,” Howse received a drama scholarship to Florida State University. “At that time I wanted to be on the stage, so it was a thrilling time in my life,” she says. “I changed interests in graduate school, influenced significantly by social concerns and my work in one of the largest antipoverty projects in the Southeast.

She graduated from FSU in 1966 with a degree in Eng-



lish literature. She went on to receive a master's degree in English lit and a doctorate in linguistics from FSU. In 1990, she was also awarded an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from the State University of New York Health Science Center at Brooklyn.

Dr. Howse's pathway to the March of Dimes was marked by one service-oriented milepost after another. In the late 1960s, she was hired as director of planning and evaluation for the school system in Wakulla County, Florida.

She moved to Washington, DC in 1972 to become director of the HEW Liaison Project for the National Association for Retarded Citizens. In 1973 she returned to Tallahassee as director of the Developmental Disabilities Bureau of the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitation Services.

In 1975, Dr. Howse was named executive director of the Willowbrook Review Panel—an arm of the Federal Court responsible for overseeing the closure of Willowbrook State Center for the Mentally Retarded in New York City. Three years later, New York Gov. Hugh Carey appointed Dr. Howse to be associate commissioner of mental retardation and development disabilities for New York City and Long Island.

In 1980 she was appointed by Governor Dick Thorn-

burgh to serve as commissioner of Pennsylvania's Office of Mental Retardation. In Pennsylvania, she says, "I became very concerned with the lack of prevention services. Simply put, there were many individuals admitted to state residential facilities due to mental retardation from preventable causes such as PKU or rubella syndrome. I became extremely interested in exploring opportunities to augment primary prevention through public health interventions, policy changes, and research."

Then in 1985 she was named executive director of the Greater New York chapter of the March of Dimes, with a mission to improve birth outcomes through prevention. "I moved back to New York and Brooklyn permanently," she says. "Brooklyn Heights was—and is—one of the most beautiful and friendly neighborhoods in the city."

In 1990 she became the first woman president of the March of Dimes national organization.

During her tenure, Dr. Howse has been an outspoken proponent for preventive services, well-baby care and vaccinations to ensure that children grow up healthy and strong. She has worked with sanofi pasteur to raise awareness among new parents for the CDC recommended Tdap booster for all adolescents and adults between 11 and 64, especially those who are in close contact with infants. "Our company views this as a critically important initiative," Mr. Braga says, "as only about 2 percent of adults have received the vaccine, and when researchers were able to determine where babies diagnosed with pertussis had contracted the disease, about half the time, it was from their parents."

Through advocacy, Dr. Howse and the March of Dimes have expanded newborn screening programs across the country. Screening babies at birth for certain serious metabolic disorders is crucial. When diagnosed early, these problems can be treated and lives can be saved. In 2005, only 38

percent of the 4 million newborns were born in states that require testing for 21 or more of the 29 recommended conditions. By the end of 2008, all states had passed legislation to require testing for at least 21 of the treatable conditions.

In 2008, Dr. Howse keynoted the Surgeon General's Conference on Preterm Birth which brought together preeminent scientists from the public and private sectors to review scientific understanding of prematurity, and create an actionable plan for research and activities related to prevention.

Her energy and enthusiasm for improving children's health has been much admired. "I have personally worked with Dr. Howse in a variety of scientific, clinical and political settings and witnessed her effectiveness and tenacity," says David R. Smith, MD President of State University of New York Upstate Medical University in Syracuse. "Whether it was the battle to determine the causes of neural tube defects in South Texas that led to the National Folic Acid Campaign and the expansion of Birth Defect Registries, or the unprecedented advocacy for the now enacted 'Premie bill,' or the state by state achievements to expand newborn screening to protect newborn infants, her resolve and keen grasp of the fundamentals have improved the health and well-being of babies."

Dr. Smith says: "I can think of no better advocate to walk the halls of Congress in order to effect change. Under her leadership the March of Dimes has built a collaborative response to the 'epidemic' of prematurity."



When it comes to running the venerable March of Dimes—which was founded in 1938 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to combat polio—Dr. Smith says that Dr. Howse “has a very expansive view of the role of this respected organization and has built coalitions or joined efforts to define and address issues such as vaccine preventable diseases with the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.”

As president, Dr. Howse is responsible for directing the vast mission of a voluntary health organization with an annual operating revenue of \$226 million, a staff of 1,400 and three million volunteers.

That spirit of volunteerism played a role in one more defining life experience for Dr. Howse. “When I was four years old,” she remembers, “my Mom took me through our California neighborhood ringing doorbells to collect dimes for my Uncle Joe who had polio. This was my first successful fundraising experience.

Decades later, of course, my Mom claimed credit for the early training in community fundraising that led to my selection as March of Dimes President!”

In her leisure time, Howse enjoys hiking, cooking, reading a good book or listening to different kinds of music: jazz, folk, and Italian opera. And, she adds, “I play a little guitar.”

From her own life she offers this advice on selecting your vocation: “Get different experiences with the people or organizations doing the work you think you want to do. If you are truly inspired—reach for it!”