

Russell W. Currier, DVM – IPHA President - 1979

Reflections on IPHA Presidency, 1979-1980



In 1978, during my third year as state public health veterinarian, indeed the 'salad days' of my Iowa career, I was elected to be president-elect of IPHA. This honor came with the ex-officio responsibility to be the program chair for the annual meeting before my taking office. In an effort to generate more interest and do something different, and based on my acquaintance with the Nebraska public health community during earlier CDC sojourn in Lincoln, I contacted some officers of the Nebraska Public Health Association and suggested that we have a joint meeting of our associations in the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area. They amicably agreed and assigned two very high energy female NPHA members to meet with me in the months ahead to map out a program. I apologize for the inability to recall their names.

In fact we put together a very nice conference with sessions on both sides of the Missouri River but with the first session at an Omaha hotel. I vividly recall Dick Biondi, health director for Council Bluffs and Pottawattamie County [later health director for an east coast Florida community], introducing his mayor to offer welcoming remarks. The mayor could not resist an opportunity for humor and complained that he "was getting tired of always having to go to Omaha to welcome people to Council Bluffs." I was responsible for securing, Dr Bill Foege, Director of CDC, as the keynote speaker for the conference partially as a function of serving earlier on committees with Dr Foege. Again I do not recall his message and regret that we did not record and transcribe it. My advice to the younger generation of public health workers is don't let these opportunities go by and be sure to record public addresses of this nature.

Another notable speaker that we were able to secure was Bill Hettler MD, Director of Student Health at Wisconsin State University, Stevens Point, WI. [Note this is where Dr Patricia Quinlisk was completing her premedical studies at the time.] Dr Hettler was one of the early physicians to recognize the value of health promotion and integrated these efforts into the student health program at the college. This included efforts to reduce tobacco use and consumption of ethanol based beverages that in Wisconsin presented special challenges for sure. Bill was so gung-ho that he was dressed in a blue pinstripe suit, shirt and tie but wearing white athletic shoes. A person attired this way would not turn a head in an airport today but in 1979 it was really different. Dr Hettler, as a national leader in health promotion movement, delivered a most inspiring talk that clearly defined the challenges for us all.

The other highlight of the meeting was to sponsor a fun run ... maybe the first of its kind. We all dutifully assembled in the Council Bluffs hotel parking lot and had a spirited race to the finish. Steve Gunson [now assistant to Des Moines' city manager] had the advantage over all of us wearing a baseball cap with stylized gold wings on each side. I offered to buy it off his head but he declined to sell.

It was a terrific meeting but attendance was disappointing to me. Given the fact that it was on the western edge of Iowa our attendance was markedly less than expected and Nebraska's participation was poor for reasons not clear to me. The combined

attendance was only slightly higher than we would have expected if we met alone in central or eastern Iowa. Nevertheless I remain convinced this effort was worth the trial.

The next year saw me shouldering responsibilities as CEO of IPHA and our subsequent meeting was jointly held with Iowa Environmental Health Association at Adventure Land Inn, on May 1-2, 1980 that offered good rates before their busy summer season and long before Prairie Meadows happened on the scene. As best I recall, we had a great two day conference and repeated the fun run to highlight the waxing societal interest in getting fit through exercise.

For this conference I arranged to secure Henry Gelfand MD, MPH, professor of epidemiology with the University of Illinois Medical Center to be a keynote speaker. I asked him to do an encore of his presentation at the 15th Annual Midwest Interprofessional Seminar on Diseases Common to Animals and Man, August 1973, entitled "Concepts of Disease Eradication and Control." This is a classic lecture – a 'keeper' to read once a year if you will - and gives a great perspective on health and medicine and its improvement over the decades. [Ref: Gelfand, H.M. The Pharos of Alpha Omega Alpha, January 1974, Vol 37, No 1, pages 11-16. Copyright 1974 by Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society. Copies available from ruscurrier@yahoo.com.]

In summary I really enjoyed my service to IPHA and holding office as president. It was intuitively obvious that I was part of a great organization and in a terrific state for the main shank of my life's career. However this 'honeymoon' phase ended fairly abruptly in the next year with the farm crisis of 1981 ushering in a great deal of pain and tight budgets that was not matched until the economic downturn of the past couple years. In spite of this be positive, do good work and stay in touch!

By Russell W. Currier DVM, Past-president IPHA, 1980
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