Appreciation

Appreciation: Philip S. Brachman, 1927–2016

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‘I have gone to heaven to teach an epidemiology course. At this point no return is planned.’ So we imagine his parting message. Philip Brachman served on the editorial board of the IJE from 1991 during the tenure of Peter Pharaoh as editor, until 2014 with George Davey Smith and Shah Ebrahim. He began when associate editors sent letters and thick envelopes to invited reviewers, and acknowledged their contributions on postcards; when he stepped down, all of these functions were done electronically, depriving his correspondents of his neatly hand-written notes. Not immune to bias, he stated in 2014 that IJE was his favorite epidemiology journal. One of his regrets was that he had not been able in all those years to attend a single meeting of the editorial board, most likely because of conflicts with his teaching schedule. Because, first and foremost, Philip was an educator. His concern was not just science but rather people, and how that science could change the quality of life for people. His is a great legacy.

Philip Brachman had a remarkable career that included 32 years of service with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) followed by a 30-year tenure as Professor of Global Health at Emory University’s Rollins School of Public Health (RSPH) in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1954, fresh out of medical residency at the University of Illinois Research and Education Hospital in Chicago, Illinois, Philip moved to Atlanta to join the Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS). CDC’s flagship 2-year training programme in applied epidemiology. As a protégé of Alexander Langmuir, the legendary CDC director who created the EIS programme, Philip provided a link to the very beginnings of using epidemiology as a formal part of all public health delivery programmes. Contributions of his investigations of outbreaks of anthrax in the USA, which were reviewed following the intentional release of Bacillus anthracis in October 2001, included recommendations for education as well as vaccination as critical for prevention. For example, one report from that period recommends that “mill employees be ‘thoroughly indoctrinated’ on the cause, nature, and control of anthrax.”

Reviewing the use of Bacillus anthracis as a bioterrorism agent, Philip presciently wrote: ‘No matter how prepared a population may be, bioterrorism cannot be prevented’, stressing the importance of planning and rapid response. At CDC, he held several positions before directing the Bureau of Epidemiology from 1970 to 1981, and later the Epidemiology Program Office. One of Philip Brachman’s lasting contributions to medicine and public health is the book Hospital Infections, now in its fourth edition, co-edited by John V. Bennett and first published in 1979, considered the most influential reference in the field. He also edited Bacterial Infections of Humans: Epidemiology and Control, with Alfred S. Evans, first published in 1991 and revised with Elias Abrutyn in 2009.

To really understand Philip Brachman’s contributions, you just need to listen to his students. As with many who enjoy their vocation, Philip had no clear concept about the rationale for retirement. Retirement from CDC in 1986 was a chance to do the same things he liked to do in a different setting. He will be remembered for his many contributions to the teaching of epidemiology. In 1983, the CDC established the Philip S. Brachman award, which recognizes excellence in teaching of epidemiology to EIS fellows. Dr Brachman was also passionate about bringing epidemiology training to public health professionals in developing countries. His untimely death in 2016 leaves an irreplaceable void in our profession.

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countries, and did so through the Field Epidemiology Training Programme modelled on CDC’s EIS programme to provide hands-on training in applied epidemiology through mentorship and public health response.

Philip Brachman was continually innovating and making epidemiology courses and training programmes more accessible to public health professionals. After joining the RSPH faculty in 1986, where he lectured in epidemiology, biostatistics, public health surveillance and infectious diseases, he became concerned that many working at public health departments lacked the skills to practise sound epidemiological investigations. Therefore he developed a series of short courses taught throughout the USA and internationally. He was meticulous in his approach to planning the academic programmes. If he requested you to give a lecture, you soon learned to respond or the request would then be channelled through three other people! His ‘Epidemiology in Action’ and ‘Public Health Surveillance’ courses for state and local public health department professionals and the ‘International Course in Applied Epidemiology’ for professionals from other countries are the result of such commitment to the careers of those in public health. These courses have maintained a steady flow of epidemiologists to the Emory University campus over many years. In addition, he took special interest in customizing courses to meet the training goals and objectives of specific countries or for specific audiences, and organized courses for professionals from China, Japan, the Newly Independent States and India on epidemiology, polio and measles, and HIV/AIDS, and taught courses internationally and throughout the USA. He would make annual trips each summer to teach epidemiology in the University of Michigan School of Public Health’s annual ‘Graduate Summer Session in Epidemiology’, for which he served as chair of the planning committee from 1988 through 2013. The 3-week programme draws approximately 250 participants each year.

Beginning in 1993, Philip served as director of the Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship programme at Emory’s Rollins School of Public Health, a programme started by President Jimmy Carter (Figure 1) in 1978 to honour the late US vice president and senator for his long-time advocacy of international cooperation. The programme supports mid-career professionals in all disciplines from developing countries who are assigned to one of 15 US institutions. Over 23 years, Philip worked with 243 Humphrey Fellows from 98 countries; the 14 Fellows in the 2015–16 class come from Brazil, Pakistan, Burkina Faso, Egypt, South Sudan, Uzbekistan, Bangladesh, Mali, Laos, Bhutan and Bulgaria (Figure 2). For 1 week each March, Philip would host the entire group of Humphrey Fellows studying throughout the USA at Emory University. It went beyond the usual hosting to actually acting as driver of the van to take them to sights around Atlanta. Every year, he accompanied the Fellows on a trip to Plains, Georgia, to visit the Jimmy Carter National Historic Site to appreciate the history of the Fellowship. On several occasions, President Carter came to Atlanta to meet with the Humphrey Fellows from throughout the USA.

In 2009, in an interview to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Humphrey Fellowship, Philip highlighted the importance of not just the new ideas that Fellows would take back to their own countries, but the contact with colleagues who shared their dedication to public health.
health and who were ready and willing to support the Fellows in their work when needed. As an example of his concern for the Fellows, in 2004 with the help of two anonymous donors he instituted a programme to provide funding to purchase laptop computers for the Fellows so that they could communicate with Emory faculty, friends and fellow Humphrey programme alumni when they returned home.

Philip’s love for education was also palpable in his extracurricular activities. He was one of the founders and also the chairman of the board of Paideia School, an independent school in Atlanta founded in 1971 by parents who wanted an individualized, creative and intellectually challenging education for their children. He also supported education for secondary school students and the construction of a computer room and library at the remote Sachangwan Secondary School in Molo District, Kenya.

It is inviting to imagine Philip Brachman’s life work as fostering a living web of public health professionals, an epidemiologist’s neural network. Before heading to the hospital, he was exchanging messages with his long-time collaborators Pia Valeriano and Flavia Traven at RSPH, to find a substitute for his planned lecture for that day. He was looking forward to being back with his students on the following day. Let us hope that space is limitless in the epidemiology classes that Philip Brachman will teach in perpetuity, because demand is likely to be high.

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