

Dr. Myron Wegman, Public Health Pioneer

Unidentified Speaker: Good health, we seem to notice and appreciate it only when we lose it. Yet, every American adult has had his or her life enhanced or even saved by preventive or corrective medicine, and our National Public Healthcare Network, extending from the heart of America's largest cities to its remotest rural areas, didn't really begin to take its present shape until the 20th century. In fact, most of its growth and development occurred in the lifetime of one very remarkable pioneering public health physician, Dr. Myron Wegman, whose career stands as a great example of how many lives one person can affect for the better. Wegman was born on July 23, 1908 in Brooklyn, New York, of Russian Jewish parents. Two of his siblings died in infancy. Typical give the health hazards facing newborns in that time and place. The year after his birth, when one-tenth of all babies in the U.S.A. didn't reach their first birthdays, the American Association for the Study and Prevention of Infant Mortality was founded, and President Theodore Roosevelt called the first White House Conference on Children. Seven years later, America endured the worst paralytic polio epidemic ever recorded, and a terrible influenza epidemic swept a world helpless to combat it. Such was the climate of New York City when Myron attended public school there. After his undergraduate years at the College of the City of New York, where he captained the lacrosse team, he began medical studies in New Haven, Connecticut, at Yale, in 1928. In his

senior year, Dr. Grover Powers, legendary mentor of a whole generation of distinguished Pediatricians, invited him to apply for an internship in pediatrics. In 1935, the Social Security Act was passed; a crucial element being Title V, which focused on the healthcare of children, and initiated a system of grants and aid to all the states. Funding that enabled the state of Maryland to appoint Dr. Wegman, here enjoying a family vacation, to a position as full-time Pediatrician for the State Health Department. He taught modern pediatrics to rural practitioners, and so began his public health career. At that time, America's infant mortality rate was still high. Thanks to the efforts of Myron and others like him, the next decade saw a steady statistical decline in infant mortality, which continues to this day.

Myron Wegman: One thing I learned in Maryland was that it was quite possible to keep a premature infant adequately warm by using an easily available tomato box. Put the baby in his bedding in there, use just an ordinary single light bulb to keep him warm enough, and keep that temperature steady, and have the additional advantage that the baby was so close to the mother that breastfeeding was possible, which it would not have been if he'd been away in a hospital.

Unidentified Speaker: Dr. Wegman received his Masters Degree in Public Health from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. His mother joined him on the campus for that occasion.

Myron Wegman: There is as much or more satisfaction in working with large populations with large numbers of people as there is in helping a single person get well from a simple disease, and I've had the good fortune to take part in teaching on both sides of that.

Unidentified Speaker: After a teaching sojourn in Puerto Rico was cut short by World War II, Myron returned to New York in 1941 to direct a training program in child health in the city's health department, which encompassed some 150 child health stations, providing services to over a third of the 100,000 babies born there every year. One of his colleagues was a young Dr. Benjamin Spock who asked Myron to review the manuscript for his book on childcare; a landmark work in teaching mothers about child development, not only in America but around the world.

Myron Wegman: During the war, of course, the physicians who were left in the city were stretched in all sorts of ways. I not only had several jobs within the Health Department, but I was teaching at Cornell in the Department of Pediatrics and in Public Health, at Columbia in Public Health, and at Johns Hopkins in Maternal and Child Health. This provoked a comment from Rex Atwater, then the Executive Director of the American Public Health Association, when he looked over the list and said to me, "Myron, you don't have a chair, you occupy a settee."

Unidentified Speaker: In 1949, Dr. Wegman began publishing an annual review of the nation's vital health statistics, emphasizing infant mortality. It's now a

fixture in Pediatrics, the official publication of the American Academy of Pediatrics. From 1946 to 1952, he was in New Orleans, a professor and Chair of Pediatrics at Louisiana State University, and Pediatrician in Chief at Charity Hospital. He spent the next eight years working with the Pan-American Health Organization, a regional office of the World Health Organization, first as Director of Education and Training, and then serving as Chief of Staff Secretary General. He became known throughout the America's for his efforts to strengthen the teaching of public health. In 1960, he became Dean of the University of Michigan's School of Public Health. Michigan had already developed a reputation for public health research before he arrived, thanks in part to the school's critical role in conducting the field trials for Dr. Jonas Salk's polio vaccine. Its use would effectively eradicate that dreaded disease. During his tenure, Michigan's School of Public Health greatly expanded its size and research programs, and he strengthened its international activities through his WHO contacts.

Noreen Clark: Myron left a tremendous legacy at the School of Public Health. Under his direction as Dean, research flourished, he built a new building, the curriculum was strengthened, and of course the international presence of Michigan was greatly amplified.

Kenneth Warner: He created a very congenial environment. It was a kind of feeling--it sounds corny to say, but it was a feeling of family, and in fact, something I've always thought about Myron, I've always felt about Myron, was

that he exemplifies what, to me, public health is really all about, and he did it in his role as Dean. He has done it since then in his role as colleague and friend.

Noreen Clark: One of the reasons that all of us love Myron, in addition to admiring him greatly, is that Myron was the person who was the most articulate about the need for every student trained in public health to understand all the parts of public health.

Unidentified Speaker: In 1968, the WHO asked him to direct a conference on the teaching of pediatrics in India, the first of its kind there. He continued to travel the world.

Myron Wegman: When I was in Vietnam, I saw some children in the last stages of dehydration that I hadn't seen since I was a House Officer in New Haven. In New Haven we saw those. We could do something about it, of course. We had the ability to put intravenous fluids and/or fluids under the skin somehow and get that child well. But here, it was agony to watch people in that state and know there was nothing you could do about it.

Unidentified Speaker: While at Michigan, he began ongoing collaborative work in public health with the People's Republic of China, which America had only recently allowed its citizens to visit. And in 1972, Dr. Wegman became Centennial President of the American Public Health Association. Public health was, by then, very much a part of American every day life. In 1961, the White House had sponsored its first Conference on Aging. The next year, Congress

passed the Migrant Health Act, providing support for clinics serving agricultural workers. Shortly thereafter, the first Surgeon General's report on smoking and health was released, leading to a significant decrease in the number of American smokers, and Medicare and Medicaid were created, making comprehensive healthcare available to millions of Americans. In the last decades of the 20th century, the world saw major advances in research on cancer, human genetics, and communicable diseases such as AIDS, but the quest for good health constantly encounters new challenges, and there will always be much work to do in the field of Public Health as new strains of illness continue to evolve.

Kenneth Warner: Myron is a role model in the field of Public Health because he's actively engaged intellectually in the world around him, and he cares about it deeply, and it's that combination that I find so impressive and so important. You're not ever going to be a very effective professional in a field like Public Health unless you care.

Unidentified Speaker: Though he received many honors during his distinguished career, Dr. Wegman considered his greatest reward to be the knowledge that he played a part in some extraordinary public health advances. He exemplifies how a single person can save and better the lives of so many.

Noreen Clark: Myron Wegman has been an inspiration for literally thousands of people around the world--his character, his integrity, his creativity, his

humanity. Myron really anticipated, more than 50 years ago, the global village.

Kenneth Warner: Myron has always told us that the objective of public health ought to be to help people to die young at a very old age, and he himself is a wonderful example of how aging can indeed be a youthful experience. It's been a real pleasure for me to grow up and indeed age myself with an individual who is as youthful and full of zest in life as he is.

Myron Wegman: I have a very deep and strong feeling that people are basically good. I cannot accept the idea that there is evil. I know there are evil people, but I know that most people are good, and I think that has meant a great deal to me.

Unidentified Speaker: And Dr. Myron Wegman, a humble man of kindness, good cheer, character, and concern, a physician, educator, public health pioneer, has meant a great deal to a great and grateful many.