

Essays on the Future of Environmental Health Research: A Tribute to Dr. Kenneth Olden

Since his appointment in 1991 as the director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) and the National Toxicology Program (NTP), Dr. Kenneth Olden has worked steadfastly to develop the field of environmental health. As a result of his efforts during an almost 14-year tenure, the field of environmental health has matured and expanded to become one of the most comprehensive and humanly relevant disciplines in science. Because of Olden's vision, we no longer concern ourselves only with the toxicity of physical agents—we now explore the effects of lifestyle, social and economic factors, and the built environment on human health.

Dr. Olden's policies emphasized the need to bring all interested parties—government, industry, academia, and the lay public—into discourse on complex and often controversial environmental health issues. For this reason, Olden created innovative research and risk assessment centers within the NIEHS and the NTP comprised of representatives from all the above-mentioned sectors. Examples of the centers include the Interagency Center for the Evaluation of Alternative Toxicological Methods and the Toxicogenomics Research Consortium. He also expanded the network of NIEHS-funded Environmental Health Sciences Centers that emphasize multidisciplinary research collaboration and coordination. To ensure community involvement, he made it mandatory for each NIEHS-funded center to have a Community Outreach and Education Program that was responsive to

local environmental health problems, particularly those of poor and minority populations.

Olden worked particularly hard to bring the lay public into the often intimidating and exclusive scientific process so that “regular citizens” could have a voice in important public health decisions. He established the NIEHS Public Interest Liaison Group, which allowed members of advocacy groups who previously had little access to decision makers to provide input on research directions and translation to disease prevention and treatment. In the late 1990s, Olden instituted a series of town meetings throughout the United States so that he could hear firsthand environmental concerns from the public.

Many scientific advances have been achieved during Olden's tenure. But, as a true humanitarian, his greater goal was to ensure that these advances were rapidly translated into real improvements in human health through both clinical practice and public health policy. In 1992 Olden took a critical step toward facilitating translation of research findings into applications by converting the institute's journal *Environmental Health Perspectives (EHP)* into a monthly publication and expanding its scope to include environmental news coverage. Other steps toward achieving the goal of translation included the launching of the Environmental Justice Grants Program and the Community-Based Prevention/Intervention Research Program.

Although there is no doubt that Olden has been the driving force behind many of the advances in the

field of environmental health, he fully recognizes that these achievements could not have been made without the support of the staff of the NIEHS and the larger environmental health community. One of his strengths has been to identify and bring into the NIEHS community the most gifted scientists and strongest leaders. In particular, he credits his deputy director, Dr. Samuel Wilson, with playing a major role in the expansion of environmental health through his counsel and support on many major initiatives, most recently and perhaps most profoundly, the development of the environmental genome project and the field of toxicogenomics.

Chronicling Olden's accomplishments provides more than a simple recognition of one man's contributions. Because these contributions are inextricably intertwined with the development of the field of environmental health, a look back allows us to see in broad brush the evolution of both an individual career and a discipline. Most important, such a retrospective can help provoke us to consider where the field is going next. The essays herein were invited of people who played vital roles in the evolution of environmental health and who can bear witness to Dr. Olden's impact. It is hoped that the



Left: Dr. Kenneth Olden, Director, NIEHS/NIH, 1991–2005.

Below: Dr. Kenneth Olden and Dr. Samuel H. Wilson, Deputy Director, NIEHS/NIH.



personal thoughts and opinions expressed in these essays will go beyond recollections to spur deliberations on the future of environmental health. We could think of no more fitting tribute to a man so vital to its past.

On behalf of the environmental health community, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Kenneth Olden for his enduring vision, strong leadership, and abiding humanity.

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