

EDITORIAL

THE PRINCE MAHIDOL AWARDS

Three physicians (an American, a Nigerian and a Norwegian) received the Prince Mahidol Awards for 1999, in a ceremony held at the Grand Palace in Bangkok presided over by Her Majesty the Queen of Thailand on January 31, 2000.

The Prince Mahidol Awards were started in 1992 to commemorate the contribution toward modernization of the medical and health systems of Thailand by Prince Mahidol of Songkla whose centennial birthday anniversary fell on January 1st 1992. Prince Mahidol was the son of King Chulalongkorn. He received an education at a naval academy in Germany and after graduation was commissioned in the Royal Thai navy. He was involved in the preparation of a plan by the Navy to modernize the fleet and at the same time became interested in the food and nutrition of Thai sailors. The naval ships were small and most of them had problems with food storage.

When the modernization plan for the fleet was not accepted by the government he decided to resign from the Navy and went to the United States to study at the School of Public Health at Harvard University. After a year of study he enrolled in Harvard Medical School, from which he graduated in 1928 with the degree of doctor of medicine cum laude. During his course he co-authored an article with an American investigator on intestinal parasites of children in Boston, published in the American Journal of Diseases of Children.

During his days at Harvard, Prince Mahidol became the principal Thai official negotiating and implementing a project between the Rockefeller Foundation and the Thai Government to make improvements in Siriraj Medical School, the first western style medical school in Thailand. He had to travel back and forth to Bangkok quite a number of times during those years. He put great personal effort into this project and also contributed considerable personal financial resources to supplement the Thai Government budget in order to move the project forward. His financial contributions were for the construction of buildings and land for nursing programs, buildings for the medical school and hospital, scholarships for faculty members in basic science, nursing, clinical specialties, and an

endowment for medical research.

Even though he passed away at the age of 37, his contribution toward the strengthening of the evolution of the medical school had a great influence on the health system of the country. He was considered to be the "Father of modern medicine in Thailand". He played a major role in pushing medical education into the university system so that physicians were educated to be practitioners with the potential to conduct research, and by virtue of a broader educational background, were better equipped than many to perform other duties required for the development of the country.

Dr AG Ellis, an American pathologist who was seconded to Thailand during this period, first as visiting chairman of the department of pathology and later as the visiting dean of the medical school, wrote an article on the life of Prince Mahidol at that time. He told of the great interest His Royal Highness had shown in medical education, medical research, mother and child health, and basic medical sciences.

These are the issues that still echo in the great halls of medicine and public health throughout the world even today. Prince Mahidol firmly believed that knowledge was the important basis for any developmental efforts, and good knowledge must be put to use for improvement of the life of mankind. He also emphasized the human facet in the life of every physician.

Most of Prince Mahidol's beliefs have been used as a guide for the selection of appropriate persons to receive the award. Two awards are given annually. Each award consists of a medal, a certificate and cash of \$50,000. The first award goes to an individual(s) who contributes new knowledge or practice in medicine or health. The second award goes to an individual(s) who has applied the knowledge of practice in medicine or health contributed by others, successfully. For both awards, the contribution must be shown to be of great benefit to a large number of people, transcending national boundaries. The awards are available for citizens of all countries of the world.

For this year, Dr R Palmer Beasley received

the first award because of his contribution on the pathogenesis of the vertical transmission of hepatitis B viral infection from pregnant mothers to infants and for the demonstration of a causal relationship between the chronic or carrier stage of infection of hepatitis B and liver cell carcinoma. These findings laid the groundwork for immunization with hepatitis B vaccine to prevent hepatitis B viral infection and liver cell carcinoma.

The other award went to Dr AO Lucas of Nigeria and Dr Tore Godal of Norway. Both are former directors of the Special Programme for Tropical Disease Research and Training (TDR) of the World Health Organization. Both worked hard to bring the TDR program to become a peak research and training program on tropical diseases.

They have been able to persuade a number of leading scientists of the world to take interest in this field, which embraces diseases of the less educated, impoverished people who do not have good access to modern health facilities. Both geared the main effort of TDR to the education and training of scientists from developing countries, so that a large number of them are now conducting research side by side with their colleagues from developed countries. New drugs, new vaccines and diagnostics have come out of the program. Special efforts are made to ensure that private pharmaceutical companies are brought in early in active participatory roles, and are involved in the development and manufacture of those products so that the fruits of TDR will be accessible and affordable to people of the developing world.

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