

125 Years of Public Health



Dr. Carl Brumback and County Health Departments in Florida

by E. Russell Jackson, Jr.

As we progress through this year in celebrating the 125th Anniversary of Public Health in Florida, it is important to note not only the State Health Officers and the accomplishments of public health during their tenures, but also those who provided public health services at the local level in the counties and communities of Florida where public health services are delivered to the people of Florida and our visitors. Among these, one of the most important to recognize is Clarence L. “Carl” Brumback, M.D., M.P.H., who is now deceased, but who was the founding county health officer of the Palm Beach County Health Department in 1950, which was the last big county to have a county health department, with St. Johns County being the last county in 1960.

Dr. Brumback was one of the most innovative and important public health physicians in the nation. What he and his public health professional staff did in Palm Beach County is recognized in one of the leading public health school text books by Hanlon and Pickett. The American Medical Association also recognized Dr. Brumback with its top award, the Dr. Nathan Davis Award for Outstanding Government Service, and the American Public Health Association awarded Dr. Brumback its oldest and most prestigious award, the Sedgwick Memorial Medal. The Florida Medical Association presented Dr. Brumback with its highest award, the Certificate of Merit. In 1968 the FPHA bestowed Dr. Brumback with its highest award, the Meritorious Service Award, and the FPHA also named one of its most important annual educational conference sessions after him, the Brumback Lecture.

Dr. Brumback's career in public health with the Palm Beach County Health Department spanned over forty years and he did great work in establishing public health programs in Florida and nationally for migrant workers, and he also established a unique public health residency program at the Palm Beach County Health Department, that has become like many of his other innovations a model for other county health departments around the country. The first Secretary of the new Florida Department of Health and State Health Officer after the 1996 law passed creating DOH, James T. Howell, M.D., M.P.H., started his outstanding and very distinguished career in public health working with Dr. Brumback, becoming his Assistant Director. This experience with Dr. Brumback launched Dr. Howell along the way toward his impressive and distinguished career in public health at the highest levels of Florida's state government.

An important and not well known fact about Dr. Brumback is that when Dr. Sowder was retiring in 1974, the Secretary of the then Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS), Mr. O. J. Keller, offered Dr. Brumback the position of State Health Officer as Dr. Sowder's successor. Dr. Brumback turned Secretary Keller down because public health at the state level had been absorbed in 1969 into a massive social services agency that had a lot of non-public health competing programs and interests, and as such Dr. Brumback felt he could continue to be more effective in providing public health services at the county and community level. Dr. Brumback then recommended to Secretary Keller that he appoint the State Epidemiologist and Director of the Bureau of Preventable Diseases, E. Charlton Prather, M.D., M.P.H. as the State Health Officer, which is what happened in 1974. So Dr. Brumback is important to know about as well because he could have become Florida's State Health Officer; and his decision not to accept this prestigious position led to the appointment as State Health Officer of two of his closest colleagues, Dr. Prather and Dr. Howell.

On the precipice of his involvement in World War II during the early 1940s, Dr. Brumback received his medical degree from the University of Kansas School of Medicine and completed his residency at the United States Marine Hospital in San Francisco. Due to a physician shortage at the nearby federal prison on Alcatraz, Dr. Brumback and the other residents at the Marine Hospital also rotated through the infirmary at Alcatraz treating some of the most infamous criminals who were imprisoned there. Dr. Brumback then served in Europe in General George S. Patton's 3rd Army marching to Berlin. After the Allies victory, the Army discharged many physician officers too quickly. As a result the Army had too few doctors in Germany. Consequently, Dr. Brumback became the deputy commander at a military hospital in Cassel, Germany at a very young age. As an incentive, the Army brought his wife, Lucy, and their first of two sons to join him in war torn Europe.

After 16 months in Europe, Dr. Brumback returned to the United States. He had by this time become interested in public health and creating better systems of care through increased cooperation between the public and private sectors. So he enrolled in the University of Michigan School of Public Health where he received his M.P.H. degree. One of the physicians on the Michigan faculty left to take a position as a medical director for the Atomic Energy Commission in Oakridge, Tennessee, and enlisted Dr. Brumback to work with him. Dr. Brumback would soon succeed his colleague at Oakridge, and also started receiving offers from around the country at public health departments. Florida's State Health Officer, Dr. Wilson Sowder, had heard of Dr. Brumback's work at the Atomic Energy Commission, and recommended him to create a county health department in Palm Beach County. After interviewing with Dr. Sowder and the Palm Beach County Board of Commissioners, Dr. Brumback was appointed as the first Director of the new Palm Beach County Health Department in 1950.

Dr. Brumback immediately met with physician leaders from the Palm Beach County Medical Society, and worked closely with the local physician community to help him carry out the many innovative programs he would institute at the Palm Beach County Health Department. Dr. Brumback's public health programs on behalf of migrant workers are legendary. "When I took over as the director of the health department in 1950," he said, "there were 114,000 residents in the county, and I had a budget of \$92,000. To make matters worse, Palm Beach County had one of the largest population of migrant farm workers in the nation—roughly 55,000. There were very few physicians in the area at the time and even fewer specialists. By the time many of the migrant workers received medical attention, their cases were terminal. Their living conditions were abysmal, making homes out of packing crates in sparse labor camps."

These living conditions at that time led the noted journalist and news broadcaster, Edward R. Murrow, to broadcast on national television his famous documentary, "Harvest of Shame." It also led Dr. Brumback to seek and receive a federal grant to study the health of migrant workers that resulted in a book by the study's principal investigator, Earl L. Koos, Ph.D., then head of the Department of Social Anthropology at Florida State University, entitled *They Follow the Sun*. Dr. Brumback and Dr. Koos approached Elizabeth Peabody, M.D., a pediatrician with the U.S. Children's Bureau about funding a project and received \$250,000, resulting in two new health centers in Belle Glade in the western part of Palm Beach County to treat migrant workers and their families. Dr. Brumback's program became a model for the nation, and inspired, with the help of West Palm Beach Congressman Paul Rogers, a multi-million dollar federal program to build similar migrant health programs throughout the United States. Dr. Brumback was appointed to a national committee to supervise these programs to ensure their success.

Dr. Brumback was soon approached by a West Palm Beach city commissioner to develop a similar program for the provision of direct medical care for the indigent and underserved populations in Palm Beach County. As a result, Dr. Brumback and the commissioner met with Dr. Sowder at the State Board of Health in Jacksonville and received his approval to provide primary care to patients through a partnership between the public and private sectors; thus providing medical care in Palm Beach County to those persons in need. Among his many groundbreaking programs, Dr. Brumback established an Environmental Health and Engineering Department at the Palm Beach County Health Department. Dr. Brumback stated that "when I came in 1950, Palm Beach County had a considerable pollution problem. They didn't have sewage processing, so we organized a system to deliver it and the standards to enforce it." He urged legislators to clean up Lake Okeechobee.

He also administered polio vaccines and tetanus shots, and battled tuberculosis that was rampant in the Glades. "He was among the first to enlist nutritionists and social workers to create a total wellness plan for migrant workers. His philosophy: Every dollar spent in prevention can save thousands in treatment." In 1956 he started the public health residency program in the Palm Beach County Health Department to train physicians graduating from medical school in public health and preventive medicine, the first of its kind in the country and which has been emulated at other county health departments nationally. This program has trained hundreds of physicians enrolled in the Palm Beach County Health Department's residency program. "He wrestled state and federal officials to lift restrictions on Medicaid financing so more people could get dental care, physicals, and prescriptions. He successfully accomplished this in 1981."

Dr. Brumback retired as the Director of the Palm Beach County Health Department in 1985 at the age of 72. During his long tenure which began in 1950, Dr. Brumback built five health department clinics. When a new clinic opened in Belle Glade, Palm Beach County officials named it the C. L. Brumback Health Center in his honor. Dr. Brumback continued to direct the public health residency program into his 80s. Dr. Brumback's beloved Lucy passed away a few years after moving from their home on Lake Worth to a retirement community in Palm Beach Gardens. Dr. Brumback would follow her, passing away on January 13, 2012 at age 97. Dr. Brumback and Lucy were survived by their two sons and numerous grandchildren and great grandchildren. Dr. Brumback's legacy is the improved health of the residents and visitors to Palm Beach County, as well as the improved health of countless others in Florida and around the country who were provided public health services by those public health workers who were inspired by Dr. Brumback, worked with him, or received their residency training and other educational training at the Palm Beach County Health Department. Whenever he would be told that what he was doing is a model for the country, the always humble Dr. Brumback would simply say that what we are doing here works well here, it might not work so well everywhere as every place is different.

Each of the 67 county health departments in Florida has its own history of accomplishments and leaders. Their story is worth knowing about and thus telling too. Such is the rich history of public health in Florida because of its strong state and county health department system started some 125 years ago with the creation of the State Board of Health, and our public health heroes starting with Dr. Porter. Although he was never the State Health Officer, Dr. Brumback ranks at the top with our greatest heroes of public health in Florida.

2014 FPHA Annual Educational Conference

The 2014 FPHA Annual Conference was filled with excellent educational speakers and topics, informative poster presentations, plenty of interesting exhibitors, great networking opportunities, some nice silent auction items and books, and a chance to come together with public health peers from all programs and all areas of the state to share and learn. And it started off with a very special welcome from one of our own – Vice Mayor and District 3 Orange County Commissioner, Pete Clarke. Pete served as the FPHA President in 1985 and worked in the Orange County Health Department and other CHD's before going with the City of Orlando.

The speakers were all excellent and covered a broad range of topics addressing the future of public health. General Session speakers included Roderick King, MD, MPH, Director of the Florida Institute for Health Innovation, who talked about Social Determinants and how public health can take a lead; Donna Petersen, ScD, MHS, Dean of the College of Health, USF, (one of our favorites who joins us every year), who spoke about the upcoming Framing the Future report which has recommendations on the transformation of education to meet future needs; Richard Hofrichter, PhD from the National Association of County & City Health Officials (NACCHO) educating us about Health Equity and helping us better understand strategies needed to address this issue; Anna Likos, MD, MPH, Director of the FDOH Division of Disease Control and Health Protection, telling about the disease control challenges occurring in Florida and around the nation the past year; Our own Florida Surgeon General and State Health Officer, Dr. John Armstrong, who identified and challenged us to look at innovative and “out of the box” ways to address the health problems facing Floridians, and gave us many examples to consider; and an outstanding panel on Technology & Public Health and how we can use it. Sarah Matthews, Dr. Gregory Welch, Chait Renduchintala, Tom Herring, Dr. Charles Hughes and Dr. Peter Kincaid were a wealth of examples and ways to apply technology to public health programs. They were so interesting the audience did not want to leave and continued to ask questions.

Afternoon breakout sessions were also great. Topics ranged from Genomics; Childhood and Adult Obesity; Public Health in Transition; Viral Hepatitis in Florida; Collaborating to address Chronic Disease; Public Health Funding Now and in the Future; HIV/STD Testing and Healthy Teen Expo's; CLAS Standards; Mobile Apps; the ACA and its Impact on Public Health; lot's of Oral Health topics; and much more. No matter what public health area you worked in, there was plenty for you.