

Photo: Bill Van Der Decker



*Former President Jimmy Carter,
Former First Lady Rosalynn Carter
Co-Recipients of the Jimmy
and Rosalynn Carter Award for
Humanitarian Contributions to the
Health of Humankind*

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While all recent former U.S. presidents have created libraries and museums documenting their presidency, Jimmy Carter has taken steps beyond the traditional post-presidential role. In 1982, a year after he left the White House, he and his wife, Rosalynn, started The Carter Center. The Center has worked to protect human rights, to promote democracy, and to resolve conflicts in nations around the world. It has taken pioneering steps in urban revitalization and in international and domestic health. The Carters created a place where people come together to resolve their differences and where professionals come together to solve global health problems.

So, in recognition of this humanitarian effort, the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases honors Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter with a new award. The Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Award for Humanitarian Contributions to the Health of Humankind recognizes individuals whose

outstanding efforts and achievements have contributed significantly to improving health nationally and globally.

“President Carter wanted to do more than just set up a memorial to his presidency. He wanted to do something about issues he thought were important,” says Steven Hochman, PhD, Associate Director for Programs at The Carter Center.

“President Carter is not the first former president to be active in public life, but he has taken the role to a new level. No one before has made the former presidency a real public service career.”

From his earliest days, health was one of President Carter’s major interests. His mother, Lillian Carter, was a nurse who inspired him. As governor of Georgia, he ordered a study into the state’s health problems. “That study emphasized prevention,” says Dr. Hochman.

This interest in disease prevention continued during President Carter’s White House years.

Jimmy & Rosalynn Carter with former CEO of Merck & Co, Inc. Dr. Roy Vagelos, in Chad.
Photo: Bill Van Der Decker





Photo: Rick Diamond

In 1977, the Carters met with Senator Dale Bumpers of Arkansas and his wife, Betty, to talk about childhood immunization. Shortly afterward, Joseph A. Califano, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, started a new childhood immunization initiative at the President's request.

A partnership also developed between Mrs. Carter and Mrs. Bumpers. These two women tenaciously campaigned for immunization of school children, says William Foege, MD. "They traveled around the country getting the spouses of all the state governors involved in immunization efforts," he says. Dr. Foege is Health Policy Fellow at The Carter Center and former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In 1991, Rosalynn Carter and Betty Bumpers rejuvenated this national campaign calling it, Every Child by Two, with the goal to adequately immunize every child by the age of two years.

Childhood immunization continues in Atlanta through another Carter Center activity, an urban revitalization program known as The Atlanta Project. It is one answer to increasing concerns about the health of children from low-income families. Some surveys have found that only about half of these children are fully immunized. Both of the Carters have been intimately engaged in the immunization initiatives of The Atlanta Project.

Health was one of the first subjects to be tackled when The Carter Center was started in September 1982. "We put together a task force drawn from people at Emory University and the CDC. It included Dr. Foege," says Dr. Hochman. "Very quickly it became apparent that Dr. Foege had great ideas. He knew what to do, and President Carter was interested in the same things. It has become a remarkable partnership."

"President Carter has become one of the most effective public health people I have ever met," says Dr. Foege. "Maybe it is because he has access to the heads of state. This is something that public health people always wish they had. They get an idea, and they wish they could go to the heads of state and get it implemented. Well, President Carter does that."

The outcome has been the development of a unique partnership in public health endeavors that is succeeding, often in initially unpromising circumstances.

"About seven years ago," Dr. Foege says, "I was in Ghana with Norman Borlaug, the Nobel



Photo: The Carter Center



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Laureate.” Dr. Borlaug is a senior consultant for agriculture for the Center. “He told me, ‘There’s one thing I’d still like to do. I’d like to introduce quality corn into Africa.’ He bemoaned the fact that it would take too long, and he would not live to see it.

“I mentioned this to President Carter that afternoon. He said he was having dinner with the President of Ghana, Jerry Rawlings, and asked me to bring Dr. Borlaug along,” Dr. Foege says. “They had hardly sat down to dinner before President Carter started talking about this quality corn.”


An adult can survive prolonged starvation, but growing children can not. A child deprived of food stops growing almost immediately because of the energy needed to build protein, and the child develops a condition called kwashiorkor. The disorder was first brought to world attention by Cecily Williams in 1933, Dr. Foege notes.

“Drawing President Rawlings’ attention to this,” says Dr. Foege, “we said it would be nice if the solution to kwashiorkor could come from Ghana in Dr. Williams’ lifetime. President Rawlings asked how old she was. I replied that she was 95. He sat straight up and said: ‘We don’t have much time.’ He asked Dr. Borlaug to have a plan ready by the morning.

“Three months later we had a scientist working there adapting the strain. By the time Dr. Williams died at the age of 99, they were producing this corn, and by last summer up to half of all the corn grown in Ghana is of this quality strain. This means that children in Ghana can be weaned on maize alone and still be properly nourished.” Dr. Foege says.

“This is the sort of thing that neither of us could have done that quickly by ourselves, but President Carter is able to open these political doors to get good public health programs going. Dr. Borlaug was right. It would have taken too long through the conventional channels. We have been able to do things we could never have done because he has access to the leaders of the nations we work in,” Dr. Foege adds.

Another major success of The Carter Center is an attack on Guinea worm disease. “This disease is going to be



eradicated from the world. It’s already decreased 97 to 98 percent in the last eight years,” declares Dr. Foege. The Guinea worm is a parasite, the larvae of which are present in impure drinking water. It affects people in 16 African countries, as well as India, Pakistan, and Yemen. The Guinea worm program teaches villagers to strain their drinking water through cloth filters and to purify water sources with a nontoxic larvicide.

“The entire program is due to President Carter going out and getting the needed resources,” Dr. Foege says. “President Carter saw that it was a disease of poor people that affected their quality of life, and he put his reputation behind an effort to raise the money needed to mount the eradication program. Guinea worm disease will be eradicated as a tribute to him.”

Another major parasitic infection, onchocerciasis or river blindness, is

also yielding to Carter Center programs. Mectizan, a drug used to treat the condition, is donated by Merck and Company to The Carter Center, which supervises its distribution in 30 African nations and in some Latin American countries. "Last December the World Bank launched a fund to raise \$131 million to pay the distribution costs," says Dr. Foegen. "Announcing this onchocerciasis control program, James D. Wolfensohn, the bank's president, said: 'There must be hundreds of diseases in the world, but I only know two—Guinea worm and onchocerciasis—and that's because President Carter keeps telling me that I need to know about them.'"

As First Lady, Rosalynn Carter chaired the President's Commission on Mental Health, which helped pass the Mental Health Systems Act of 1980. Since then, she has formed at the Center a task force for this critical issue, which comprises experts, consumers, and advocates who work for positive change in the mental health field.

This group works to erase the stigma

of mental illness and has pushed for parity between mental and physical illnesses. "She and Betty Ford were very influential in getting this issue before Congress," Dr. Foegen notes. "We still have great gaps, but the progress that's been made is largely due to Mrs. Carter."

Every year Mrs. Carter holds the Rosalynn Carter Symposium on Mental Health Policy to bring together leaders of the nation's mental health organizations. Mrs. Carter brings groups of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and interested lay groups together to work toward a common objective. "That these leaders in the mental health field, both professional and lay organizations, work together and not against each other is one of the most important things that has happened in this field," comments Dr. Foegen. "All of this is due to her leadership."

There is a story that shortly before President Carter left the White House, he met the priest, Father Robert F. Drinan, who was retiring from the Congress at the request of the Pope. "Father," said President Carter, "God wants us both to do something different, and it will be more important." For thousands of people who have benefitted from the works of Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, the former president was certainly correct.

