

In Memoriam: Patricia A. Buffler (1938–2013), IEA President-Elect

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Photograph courtesy of Jim Block

Too much openness and you accept every notion, idea, and hypothesis—which is tantamount to knowing nothing. Too much skepticism—especially rejection of new ideas before they are adequately tested—and you’re not only unpleasantly grumpy, but also closed to the advance of science. A judicious mix is what we need.

Carl Sagan (1995)¹

It is with profound sadness that we inform members of the International Epidemiological Association (IEA) and the entire epidemiology community of the passing of one of the giants of our profession, Patricia A. Buffler. Her untimely death on Thursday 26 September, at the age of 75 years, ended her career at point when she was as active as ever and moving on to new challenges. Pat was President-Elect of the IEA. Her term was to start in August 2014, during the World Congress of Epidemiology to be held in Anchorage, Alaska, a state where she spent many cherished moments of her professional life; as she used to remind us.

Pat was a nurse and biologist at heart, skills she acquired as an undergraduate in 1960 in Washington, DC. Her passion for public health brought her to

University of California, Berkeley, where she earned two graduate degrees, in public health administration and epidemiology. She went on to teaching and research positions in Alaska in the early 70s. Subsequently, after more than a decade and a half of service to the University of Texas system, Pat returned to her beloved UC Berkeley in 1991 as an accomplished scholar and as Dean of the School of Public Health during most of the 90s. She stepped down as Dean in 1998 but continued on as a senior faculty member and holder of the prestigious Kenneth and Marjorie Kaiser Endowed Chair in Cancer Epidemiology.

In an impressive career that spanned five decades, she left an indelible mark as scientist, academic leader, policymaker and steward of the epidemiology

profession. As a scientist, most of her career was devoted to understanding the role of the occupational environment as a cause of cancer in adults and children. This dominant career theme brought her substantial national and international recognition because of her discoveries that led to interventions to limit carcinogenic exposures in the workplace. She not only contributed to these discoveries but also earned great national and international prominence as a leader who promoted rational and evidence-based policies for cancer control and prevention.

Pat was tireless in contributing her expertise and strong advocacy for cancer control to public health agencies at any level, irrespective of whether the concerns were local, regional, national or on a global scale. She did so with great mastery of the issues, both methodological and substantive. She was an advocate with a strong sense of pragmatism, putting science first in the agenda, without getting sidetracked by the emotional tones of a debate. Early in her career she was touched by the plight of disadvantaged Alaskan communities. She put her newly acquired epidemiologic skills to study sociocultural stress as the cause of psychiatric illness and alcohol misuse in Alaskan natives. More recently, her eclectic public health background brought her to tackle the challenge of low human papillomavirus vaccination coverage in the USA and Canada and the need for registering observational studies to improve the signal-to-noise ratio in the environmental epidemiology literature.

Pat was at the focal point of social activism as a UC Berkeley student in the 60s. The defiance that characterized that era likely helped shape who she became: a fierce defendant of the rights of the downtrodden. She did that as a person as well as a professional. 'All persons have a right to health, including a safe environment and protection from exposures that may undermine their health',² a sentiment she voiced that clearly crystallized her firm belief that human rights serve as a foundation for public health ethics. This belief was a *leitmotiv* in all her actions as an epidemiologist and eloquent policy advocate, whether the topic was the lack of social justice for Alaskan natives, the need for improved environmental safeguards to protect children from carcinogenic exposures, or irrational measures that blocked vaccination in schools. While a firm conviction brought her to fight these battles with gusto, she also urged us to exercise prudence when contemplating uncertainty. 'In science, judgment is needed to weigh evidence and achieve an understanding of what can be gleaned from often incomplete, contradictory, and conflicting data', she wrote,³ a truism that justified her commitment to produce relevant science and underscored her plea for sound policies.

Pat was a born leader. She led our sister societies, the Society for Epidemiologic Research (SER) and the American College of Epidemiology (ACE), and was elected to the prestigious Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences. At the IEA, she

began as elected Council representative for the North American region (2005–08). She was elected as Treasurer for the following term of the Council (2008–11) and in 2011 she was elected for a nine-year term, first as President-Elect, then President and Past President. Her contributions to our association were cut short by her unexpected passing away. As our Treasurer, she led the transformation of the IEA membership and financial administration into a highly efficient, web-based system through a contract with FirstPoint Resources, a professional company specializing in administering academic associations. Pat also enhanced the value of our society's triennial congresses by adding a very popular course on epidemiological methods, which she organized in Porto Alegre, Brazil (2008) and Edinburgh (2011), and was actively preparing for next year in Anchorage. In preparation for her tenure as President, she was playing a key role in supporting the organization of both the Anchorage, Alaska (2014) and Japan (2017) congresses. She will be much missed in the IEA Council.

Few epidemiologists are as skilful as Pat was in enforcing the above dictum from Carl Sagan to one's professional life. She applied that rule as an epidemiologist and as policymaker, making important and innovative contributions to epidemiological thinking. She gave the keynote address at the most recent North American Congress of Epidemiology in July 2011, addressing the importance of epidemiologists maintaining a sceptical attitude in interpreting research findings and in helping the public to understand them. Above all, she cared deeply for epidemiology as a public health discipline and for the role of epidemiologists in advancing policy that matters. At 75 years of age, Patricia Buffler was as active and energetic as ever and heavily engaged in a wide spectrum of activities in multiple domains of public health science and practice. At the IEA we mourn the death of one of our most distinguished members: a champion of our profession and a giant of academic public health.

Note

Portions of this In Memoriam tribute to Professor Buffler appeared as an Obituary published on September 29, 2013 in the website of the International Epidemiological Association (<http://iea-web.org/2013/09/pat-buffler-1938-2013/>).

References

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