

OBITUARY

Derek Dunn

(11 December 1945 - 20 December 2002)



Today I write of my dear friend Derek Dunn, with whom I had the privilege to work since the late 80s. The saddest of news is that CAPT Derek Dunn, Ph.D., Acting Associate Director for Science at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), died on December 20th from complications arising from an aortic dissection.

Derek was the first Ph.D. graduate from the Department of Communication Disorders of the University of Cincinnati, Ohio. Following his graduation 30 years ago, Derek began his long career at NIOSH, as a Commissioned Officer of the Public Health Service (PHS), which is one of the seven uniformed services of the United States of America. From 1972 to 1977, he served as a Research Audiologist, studying the effects of noise on the hearing of coal miners and industrial workers. Derek helped design the NIOSH mobile audiometric van and was part of the NIOSH fieldwork team for doing industrial audiometric testing. Derek was instrumental in devising a plan for reviewing more than 20,000 audiograms that were available to NIOSH at the time. Personal computers did not yet exist, so a strategy was devised for inputting audiometric tracings using a touch tablet and a programmable calculator. Derek was also instrumental in implementing NIOSH's animal research on noise-induced hearing loss, so that both behavioral testing and histological preparations of the cochleae of noise-exposed animals could be performed in-house.

From 1977 to 1985, Derek conducted research as a National Institute of Health Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Otologic Research Laboratory of the Ohio State University School of Medicine. With Dr. David Lim, among others, Derek conducted pioneering research on acoustic trauma and early work on computerized cochleograms. He also taught hearing science, anatomy, and physiology in the Department of Communication at the Ohio State University. He was an adjunct professor at both the University of Cincinnati and Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. In 1982, he was invited to be a visiting scientist at the University of Lund, Malmö Allmänna Sjukhuset, in Malmö, Sweden. In Sweden, he conducted morphologic and electrophysiologic studies of noise-induced hearing loss and shared his dissection and microscopy techniques with otologic physicians conducting research at the University of Lund doctoral program.

Derek returned to NIOSH in 1985 to rise through the organization, serving in many capacities from Section Chief to Division Director. At NIOSH, he conducted and published a landmark survey on hearing loss prevention. Derek directed pioneering research on the role of chemical exposure in work-related hearing loss. He was responsible for drafting the occupational hearing loss objectives in *Healthy People 2000* and contributed to the hearing loss protocol for the *National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey*, a nationally representative survey conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics. Under his leadership, NIOSH established critical partnerships with outside groups to conduct hearing loss prevention research.

Derek served as the Special Assistant to the Director of NIOSH in the Washington, D.C. office. In 1998-99, he left NIOSH to serve as Executive Assistant to Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Health Nicole Lurie in the office of US Surgeon General David Satcher. Health indicators reveal dramatic differences among various subgroups in the United States in almost every area of health. During his work with Surgeon General Satcher, Derek's passion was the daunting task of trying to contribute to the elimination of health disparities among subgroups in the United States. In doing so, he was living up to the true ideals of a public health leader.

Derek was very active in the University of Cincinnati Alumni Associations and was one of the founders of the Alumni Association for the College of Arts and Sciences. He received the Distinguished Alumnus Award from both the Department of Communication Disorders and the College of Arts and Sciences. He actively participated in 24 different organizational committees or groups, holding leadership roles in several. Derek received 18 Public Health Service awards, a NIOSH Supervisor of the Year award, and two Scientist Professional Advisory Committee (SciPAC) Certificates. Just this past August, the Commissioned Officer Association (COA) awarded Derek the 2002 Robert Brutsche Award. It is the highest award the Association confers on a member.

Derek had an extremely successful career, yet, he remained a simple man. He drove the same old pick-up truck for as long as I knew him. He lived on a farm 45 miles from NIOSH, and on the weekends he did all the farm work such as hay baling. Despite his dedication to his job, Derek's priorities were clear: after working for 10 months with the Surgeon General, he left that job and returned to NIOSH in Cincinnati, to help his siblings take care of his mother who was gravely ill.

Derek worked very hard, but he was not all about work. He had a passion for sports and for music, and there have been witnesses to his dancing the night away at conference social events. He and CAPT John Bartko were co-founders of the USPHS Commissioned Corps Music Ensemble, created in 2000. Derek generously shared his jazz CDs with others, and those who worked past 6 pm at NIOSH remember hearing the jazz music coming out of his office. He loved travel and often shared stories about his trips.

Derek consistently helped me, not only with academic advice but also with his most respectful attitude, grow into a successful, confident researcher and human being. He treated all whom he met in the same manner. One of his greatest passions was mentoring young students, scientists and officers. He was an accomplished researcher and public health professional. But it is my view that his main contribution was to help every individual he encountered to be the best person he or she could be. One of my most endearing memories of him was how, being the accomplished man that he was, he still devoted time to summer interns to help them grow into confident, capable people. He respected the individuality of these young college students while guiding their intellectual development.

Similarly, with his employees, his door was always open. His employees knew they could approach him for private, helpful advice and direction before submitting articles, ideas, or presentations to larger audiences. Despite his high position, he never took on airs of superiority. He conversed with colleagues about their lives, hobbies, etc. in a way that made one feel important and respected in his presence. Talking with him was stimulating and challenging.

All he accomplished was with unique kindness, elegance, and respect. And this assessment is as unanimous as opinion can be, from all in the institutes and universities who were close to him. All that have met him, whether personally or professionally, were privileged to have known this truly gentle, caring person.

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Derek Dunn - A Scholar and a Gentleman

The shock of the news of Derek Dunn's death, so suddenly, so prematurely continues to be unbelievable. I spoke to him only two weeks before he died when he set-up a conference call from Washington (where he had been called to work with the Surgeon General of the US) and his base at NIOSH in Cincinnati (where Thais Morata, John Franks and Doug Sharpnack were) and with me in London. He wanted to increase the co-operation with the European Commission project NoiseChem and NIOSH, to continue the work on combined exposure effects on workers. He wished to set-up a Memorandum of Understanding between the two parties to advance the research and protection of people affected.

I had only met him twice, the last time when we invited him to the NOPHER-Nordic Noise Conference in Stockholm in October 2002. We spent a few days together discussing the possibilities for future co-operation across the Atlantic. He was very enthusiastic about plans for expansion of the research in combined exposures and very encouraging in his approach. The entire NoiseChem team supported his ideas.

We will all miss him dearly. He was a great human being who left a mark wherever he went. It was great to have known him. I felt compelled to attend his memorial service last week. I felt I missed out, having only met him twice.

A remarkable man who had so much to offer his fellow beings leaves a great void.

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