

Speech for the HTAi Distinguished Career Awards Ceremony  
June 26, 2012  
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Friends and colleagues, I am very pleased, and very honored, to receive the first HTAi Career Achievement Award.

In its message to me, HTAi mentioned that the award was to “recognize and celebrate individuals who have made a lasting impact . . . internationally.” This, in fact, is what I hope has indeed been my most important achievement, especially with the emphasis on the word international. I have often been asked to write down why and how I have worked and sometimes been successful. I would like to say a few words about it here.

Why did I have such a strong interest in other countries? Certainly, my father, who had had a dream of studying in Heidelberg, was an influence. As a medical student, I spent a several months in London and found quite different attitudes to medicine and health than I had been exposed to in the USA. This was the beginning of my realization that I could learn a great deal from people in other countries.

As a medical student in the USA, I hardly remember any mention of problems related to efficacy and safety of medical interventions. But I was fortunate to spend two years at CDC in Atlanta and discovered that there was a great deal of emphasis on determining the efficacy of preventive maneuvers. I found myself wondering why clinical medicine didn't spend the same effort on finding evidence of what worked.

I was lucky, as a young man, and just before my first extended trip to Latin America in 1973, to meet Dr. Antonio Ordonez from Colombia, who was doing a sabbatical at Yale University. I asked Dr Ordonez how I should act during these travels. He said, “You should go to learn. Don't assume that you have anything to teach.” Those words formed the basis for my work and in particular my international work. I have tried to learn about not only the health care system, but the history, culture, food, etc. This has not only given me great pleasure and brought me good friends, but I am sure that it has contributed to my professional performance.

Probably the greatest influence on my thinking was Archie Cochrane and his 1972 book Effectiveness and Efficiency. Cochrane anticipated the spread of the RCT and said that the “implementation of research results (will lead to) a probable decrease in clinical and administrative freedom.” That is historically the strongest statement I know that shows the implications of linking evidence to decision making. But still today we are struggling to ensure that evidence finds its way into clinical and political decision making.

Aside from my own orientations and wishes, I have been fortunate in having the best colleagues and collaborators. My views on HTA were very much influenced by my friend and colleague, Clyde Behney, as well as many others, during our years at the US Office of Technology Assessment (OTA). I was lucky to be at OTA when the US had a more constructive approach to health care and the role of government in health care.

In 1985, I went to Europe, in what became a permanent move. I took Dutch citizenship in 1993. I have benefited from working in countries with a rational approach to health and health care. In particular, I have worked for many years with Egon Jonsson from Sweden, who influenced my thinking and actions in many ways. My former student, friend, colleague, and now my boss, Wija Oortwijn, has contributed very much to my professional and personal life in the Netherlands and elsewhere. My wife, Ellen 't Hoen, also has taught me much, including Dutch culture and the problems of assuring access to pharmaceutical treatment for those in need in developing countries.

I would like to mention many more colleagues and friends in the USA, the Netherlands, in Europe as a whole, and in the many countries of the world where I worked, but this would only be boring to you. There are certainly too many to mention.

My own desires have always been – going back to the 1960s – to make a contribution to the health of people everywhere. I am encouraged by the many young people in the HTA field that have this orientation and are ready to take over as I and others of my generation step aside.

I have had an exciting and satisfying life in HTA around the world. This award is the capstone to my efforts internationally. Thank you all.