



James Morse Dunning



James M. Dunning, former dean of Harvard School of Dental Medicine, was one of the most of the most influential public health dentists in the United States in the past three decades. He set an example for an entire generation of educators and policymakers with his dedication to public health. His textbooks and papers have spread techniques of preventive dental care to people throughout the world.

Born in 1904 in New York City's East Side, James Morse Dunning inherited a prestigious tradition of dentistry extending over five generations. His father, William Bailey Dunning, and his uncle, the oral surgeon Henry Sage Dunning, were leaders of the committee that founded the Columbia University School of Dental and Oral Surgery. Jim Dunning maintained and extended this Dunning tradition of service to a more general concern for the public's health, specifically, the public's dental health.

In 1926, Dr. Dunning graduated from Harvard University with a bachelor's degree in biology. He then continued the family connection to Columbia University Dental School and received his D.D.S. there in 1930. Upon graduation, he joined the Columbia faculty, where he stayed until 1935. During the summers, he journeyed to the seacoast region of Labrador, Canada, where he served as a dentist in the Grenfell Mission. There he was the only dentist for 250 miles in any direction, and often traveled by motorboat to serve the oral health needs of the area's 5,000 residents. These early experiences in rural dentistry defined the character of Jim Dunning's career. He resolved to work tirelessly in support of broader access to dental care, and he promoted innovative community and school-based health programs.

From 1935 to 1945, he served as dental director for Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. During this time, he also joined the U.S. Navy Reserve. He was on active shore duty at the Brooklyn Naval Shipyard in the war years. As director for Metropolitan Life, he began his life-long commitment to analyzing the effectiveness of dental services, and searching for ways to deliver preventive programs on a group basis. George W. Ferguson, former dean of the Navy Graduate Dental Education Program in Bethesda, Md., remembers Dr. Dunning, who was one of his U.S. Naval Midshipmen's School colleagues, as a person who

*In tribute to their dedicated efforts to science and medicine, deceased members of the Harvard Faculty of Medicine (those at the rank of full or emeritus professor) receive a review of their life and contributions with a complete reflection, a **Memorial Minute**.*

“stimulated the discussion of disease control, and developed concepts of caring for the midshipmen as a group.” This population-based approach to prevention prompted Dr. Dunning to obtain a master’s degree in public health at Harvard in 1946. The degree gave Dr. Dunning a larger view of dentistry within the context of public health and the medical care system.

In 1947, at the age of 35, Dr. Dunning succeeded Leroy Johnson as dean of Harvard School of Dental Medicine. His colleagues knew him as a gentlemanly, conservative man. Johnson later wrote that one reason for his selection was that “he was not controversial in any way.” That was to change during Dr. Dunning’s term as dean!

As dean, Dr. Dunning worked for, and successfully obtained, accreditation for the school. He also implemented a number of innovations that remain today. These include expanding the Harvard University Health Services to include dental services, and making the University Health Services a teaching site for Harvard dental students. His most controversial activity occurred in the community, where he worked openly, and amidst much controversy, for fluoridation in Massachusetts and throughout the United States.

These controversies and pressures, resulting from the academic politics of the day, led to Dr. Dunning’s return to his full-time faculty position at Harvard School of Dental Medicine in 1952. He pursued a teaching and research career in his chosen specialty of dental public health. The legacy of Dr. Dunning’s academic vision and leadership in dental public health remains with us today.

In 1962, Dr. Dunning established the Department of Ecological Dentistry at HSDM, one of the first academic departments of its kind in a school of dental medicine (since renamed the Department of Oral Health Policy and Epidemiology). This department would broaden dentistry students’ experiences by linking their academic knowledge with practical community experience in dental care delivery. He developed an innovative combined-degree program in collaboration with the Harvard School of Public Health where dental students would receive a D.M.D. and a master’s degree of public health. This innovative program has trained a significant number of today’s leaders in dental public health.

Dr. Dunning focused his attention on the local problem of improving people’s access to health care in general and especially to dental care. Many Harvard dental students received their first exposure to community-oriented medicine and dentistry at the Martha Mae Elliot Health Center in Jamaica Plain, which he helped create. The center continues to meet the oral health needs of some 400 children from low-income families annually. It also serves as a model for similar comprehensive-care centers throughout Boston and the nation. Dr. Dunning also helped to establish outreach programs in rural areas in New England.

In addition to improving the public’s access to dental care, Jim Dunning had a lifelong commitment to improving the oral health of all citizens through prevention. He brought many oral health issues to the

forefront of the Massachusetts political agenda. In reviewing his life's work, he considered community-water fluoridation his most important contribution. In the late 50's and 60's, he led the fight to repeal a state law mandating that decisions to fluoridate local water supplies first be decided via referendum. Dr. Dunning led by example in his community-organizing efforts. He carried placards, wrote letters, lobbied, and spoke before large community groups. Yet he never lost the reserved bearing that prompted many citizens to address him as "Senator."

"He never became involved in the emotional conflict over fluoridation," recalled Myron Allukian, assistant deputy commissioner for community dental programs for the city of Boston. Dr. Allukian received his introduction to Massachusetts politics as Dr. Dunning's student during the fluoridation battle.

In a dramatic 1968 Massachusetts Legislature voice vote, the anti-fluoridation forces were defeated, as Dr. Dunning sat in the balcony with his "fluoridation team." This vote gave local health boards the authority to order fluoridation without first having a referendum. As a result of Dr. Dunning's efforts, more than half of Massachusetts' residents today live in communities with fluoridated water. In 1983, the American Public Health Association recognized Dr. Dunning's pioneering and persistent efforts to fluoridate Boston's water. The association granted him its John W. Knutson Award, named for the dentist who first showed the preventive value of community-water fluoridation.

Another strategy advocated by Dr. Dunning to improve access to dental care was the training of dental auxiliary personnel in order to expand the abilities of the dentist. He experienced this issue through his daughter, who served as a frontier dental care provider in Alaska. During the late 1960's, he initiated a training program for allied dental care providers at the Harvard-affiliated Forsyth Dental Center. Dr. Dunning conducted some of the earlier research on the role and abilities of expanded-duty dental auxiliaries (similar to nurse practitioners and physician assistants in medicine). His work served to stimulate a number of studies worldwide, from Saskatchewan to New Zealand. The development of a training program at Forsyth to expand the role of dental hygienists was perhaps the most controversial of his professional activities. Many dentists perceived the program as a threat to the dental profession. As a result, it was prematurely and unfortunately halted under intense pressure from the American Dental Association and the Massachusetts Dental Society.

As a scholar, Jim Dunning wrote the first internationally renowned textbook on dental public health. The book, entitled "The Principles of Dental Public Health," was published in 1962 by Harvard University Press. Jim's text is a comprehensive treatment of the field of dental public health. It includes in-depth chapters on the epidemiology of oral diseases, biostatistics and the management of data, preventive dentistry, health care policy and administration, and financing dental care. Now in its fourth edition, it has been translated into several languages and remains standard reading material in the field.

Perhaps the most impressive evidence of his commitment to scholarship occurred when a certifying

board for the specialty of dental public health was instituted. He refused to be grandfathered in, choosing instead to sit for the three-day examination. Former Chief Dental Officer of the U.S. Public Health Service Robert Mecklenburg remembers studying Dr. Dunning's book at great length before taking his specialty board examination. On the day of the examination, Dr. Mecklenburg sat down to take the test, only to find his anxiety level rising quickly. "I was amazed to find Dr. Dunning sitting beside me," Mecklenburg recalled. "There was Jim Dunning, a leading authority in his own right, possessing the courage and integrity to risk himself against a new professional standard simply because the standard was there."

Although James Morse Dunning was engaged in controversial issues, he remained a gentleman and a scholar. "I have always practiced Jim Dunning's brand of public health," commented Reuben C. Warren, director of minority dental health at the Centers for Disease Control.

Linda Niessen, chairman of the Department of Dental Public Health Sciences at Baylor College of Dentistry, said: "Jim Dunning's career stands for integrity, compassion and devotion to the science base of dental public health. He remains the gold standard for one's professional dental career."

Dr. Dunning received numerous honors and awards for his academic achievements, including the 1972 Distinguished Faculty Award of Harvard School of Dental Medicine, the Massachusetts Dental Society's Honorary Award for Service in 1972 and 1977, and an honorary doctorate from Tufts University. In 1983, his family, former students and colleagues instituted the James M. Dunning Teaching and Research Fund at Harvard School of Dental Medicine.

In honor of his father and uncle, Dr. Dunning established the Dunning Memorial Lecture at the Columbia School of Oral and Dental Surgery. The Massachusetts Public Health Association has honored Dr. Dunning with the institution of the Dunning Award for Excellence in Dental Public Health. Harvard School of Dental Medicine also bestows its own annual Dunning Award for excellence in health care research.

Dr. Dunning's last book, "Dental Care for Everyone," written during his so-called retirement in the 1980's, remains relevant today. It has been quoted in the recent debate on national health care reform. His philosophy was based on a strong sense of personal responsibility. He believed that dentists, by virtue of the trust placed in them by the public, have the duty to improve oral health for all citizens. He also felt that oral health should be a public responsibility. In his 86th year, he continued to teach and enable those of us in the next generation to link our academic efforts to the society in which we live.

Dr. Dunning was a gentleman and a scholar. He lived what he believed—that a child's potential for development or an adult's potential for employment should not be compromised or jeopardized by toothaches or the inability to chew, speak, or swallow, or by a smile with missing teeth. He was passionate in his belief that the advantages in life associated with better oral health should be available

to everyone.

Respectfully submitted,

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