



Keynote

Launching MCH: *Opportunities for a New Era*



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NOTE: This personal essay is from a lecture delivered by Dr. Magda Peck, at the John C. MacQueen Annual Luncheon, on Tuesday, February 24, 2009, in conjunction with the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs (AMCHP) annual conference in Washington DC.

Serotinous Spring

It is sweet to come home to AMCHP on the cusp of a most serotinous Spring. I am thrilled to be back among so many colleagues and friends who have welcomed me warmly and know me too well. Given my oft told belief in the “powers of three,” it should come as no surprise that this 22nd MacQueen Lecture is brought to you in three parts. In folklore as in real life, the most memorable stuff tends to come in three’s: 3 wishes, 3 strikes, primary colors, the Trilogy. What you want folks to recall is best limited to three; chances are no one remembers the fourth.

The design of this year’s MacQueen Lecture is inspired by the *Shofar*—the ancient ram’s horn of Jewish ritual. At the New Year and on *Yom Kippur*, our Day of Atonement, it is sounded three times, each with a distinct cadence. It also is blown in times of grave danger or great celebration. The first blast of the *Shofar* implores us to acknowledge powers beyond our own, and it cautions us to be humbled to the harder work ahead. The second blast summons us to honor that which has come before, for when we remember what enabled this day, we can take forth the best of what has been. The third and final blast is blown hardest and held the longest. It is the call to action, and if heeded, may inscribe us for another year in the Book of Life.

The First Blast: Humility

I am a fifty-four year old woman seasoned by science and steeped in faith. Living on the Prairie for almost 20 years has taught me one thing that 30 some years on either coast and around the world did not: **weather matters**. The weather on the Great Plains can be dramatically life-threatening, and it is worth talking about. Starting each Spring, tornados sirens become our seasonal *shofarot*. In response, we get to practice surrendering to something we ultimately cannot control, and are left to ponder why some folks are chosen while others are spared. It’s a question I’ve been asking about this remarkable award: why isn’t one of my MCH mentors or more serious and seasoned colleagues not its recipient instead? I am in awe of the contributions of unheralded others who have been leading edge architects and advocates of MCH. I am humbled to join the company of ten men, nine women, and one national organization as this year’s MacQueen awardee. And I am particularly touched to extend the legacy of three late great colleagues and previous MacQueen recipients who touched my work directly—Vince Hutchins, Doris Barnette, and Greg Alexander.



The Second Blast: Remembrance

I remember my very first national MCH meeting. It was in the Spring of 1984, at a not so luxurious Holiday Inn on the other side of town where the National Association of State and Territorial Title V directors held their annual gathering. A single room was configured as a large hollow square with fifty something chairs around, occupied for the most part by older white men...and me. I was a twenty something graduate student at the Harvard School of Public Health, invited to be a worker-bee by Dr. William Hollinshead, Rhode Island's MCH director and incoming Association president. I heard Bill and others, some in the room today, articulate a fresh vision: to transform a narrowly defined group of federally-funded program directors into something bigger and wider ... an association that would remain anchored in Title V, but go beyond the confines of positional leadership so that all MCH programs—and the professionals, partners and parents who make them work—could find greater unity under a larger tent. The Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs would be a stronger, more strategic voice with broader influence to improve the health and well-being of the women and children and families we serve. And so, AMCHP has become, mostly.

Twenty-five years ago, when I had a back row seat to change, seasoned folks clearly older and mostly wiser relied upon me to take good notes and staff them well. So let me speak directly to the younger MCH folks in residence at this conference—students and early career professionals and parents of children with special needs who have not yet reached 30.... May I ask you to stand so you can be seen? They do not need our applause for simply being earlier on in their lives, yet those of you still seated must remember this: for each of these committed, hardworking people to thrive—and thrive they must—will require our explicit and intentional investment, for they hold the future of this storied field in their heads and hearts and hands. In 2035, at what might be the 100th anniversary of Title V, one of them will stand here in my shoes at the annual meeting of whatever AMCHP will have become, to be recognized for sustained innovation and lifelong leadership. She or he will have succeeded because of what we will have done to enable and support her ideas or his actions. This is our duty, our obligation.

I am so grateful to all who fulfilled that duty for me. And I will always remember that because of you, and with many of you, I have pushed the boundaries of maternal and child health beyond Title V. In 1988, as a staffer for Boston's Parent and Child Health Services, I created the CityMatCH Project, asking: what is the leadership, organization, financing, major issues and best practices for MCH in America's largest cities? There are few among you now who do not know of or have not yet tasted the innovations of CityMatCH—Data Institutes to build capacity, Practice Collaboratives to translate science into action,

navigational conferencing, CityLights and Perinatal Periods of Risk. Through CityMatCH, we have advanced urban women's health, championed preconception health, and integrated life course approaches—each through the prism of equity and justice. In recognizing me today, AMCHP has chosen to honor and embrace fully our local sisters and brothers in the MCH field. At this moment I remember that I will always be indebted to the brilliant CityMatCH team who helped me transform vision after vision into working reality, and so many of my persuasive words into far greater deeds.

The Third Blast: A Call to Action

When the *Shofar* is blown for the final time and held until there is no more breath, it summons each of us to become our best, most powerful selves for the greater good. We are asked to do what we know we can do really well, and to do it without apology or hesitation.

This is what I do well, what you can count on me to keep on doing: Generate ideas. Push the boundaries. Challenge the status quo. Champion the health and well-being of children and work harder for women and their families. Ask hard questions. Ask them again. Translate what we have discovered into what we will agree to do better together, and get others to do what needs to be done. Grow great leaders. Bring diverse folks together across systems and sectors and difficult divides. Forge lasting alliances for the greatest good.

I married a math man who finds intrigue in numbers and calculates the odds. And while agile in numerics, our young adult sons Sam and David (an American University freshman who is my honored guest today) seem to prefer what I insisted they do as toddlers bursting with energy and emotion: *use your words*.

This too I do well: use my words to entice, cajole, persuade, provoke and inspire. For me, words have always held meaning and beauty, promise and power. They are the stuff of audible sculpture. When we craft messages that matter, stuck stuff moves. Over time I have learned that it is the power of our collective words—coupled with the intention and integrity of our deeds—that can move mountains.

Several speakers at this conference have called for paradigm shifts. Let me suggest another, this one for Title V. **Let go of the 'five.'** Transforming our signature Roman numeral into the 22nd letter of the English alphabet opens new possibilities of symbolism and action. So in the spirit of the best vocabulary-edifying television program still around, the remainder of this MacQueen Lecture will be brought to you by the letter V (vee). What comes in the form of a V? An alluring neckline, a fabulously fit swimmer's body (think Michael Phelps), Star Trek

hand greetings. It's the sign for victory and the symbol of peace. "V" is a challenging *Scrabble* letter in any of the 29 languages in which the game is officially played. While there is no V in Polish, in Turkish and German, only one V tile is in the game sporting 6 points. English versions have just two V's, each worth 4 or 5 points. In *Scrabble*, as in some aspects of life, the rarer the piece, the more value it confers.

Let's consider 'V' words we can construct to best describe our field of Maternal and Child Health. There are a handful that reflect what has served us well for nearly a century. Given the long legacy of federal legislation that has anchored our work for 80 years, MCH has been a most **venerable** movement, "commanding respect due to great age and impressive dignity." Our foremothers Grace Abbott and Martha May Elliott among others were smart and **virtuous**; no one doubts their "moral excellence." Over the decades we have remained a **viable** force "capable of living under normal conditions." Most of the time with the help of AMCHP and other partners our MCH endeavors have been **visible** to those paying attention. And when the going has gotten rough, we've been known to make some noise in unabashedly **vociferous** ways.

This six set of Vee's has done the trick for a long while, but these are not ordinary times, and words about how we should be may not be enough. We need language with verve to invoke what can and must be expected of us, and foretell what MCH people, practice, programs and policies must manifest. So I ask: What 21st Century words better describe what we must possess to thrive? Here are a few for an opening bid.

VISION. Of many definitions at hand, I am talking about the power of anticipating that which will or may come to be. I have been taught that when our vision (**V**) is multiplied by both sufficient dissatisfaction (**D**) with what is and strategic first steps (**F**) toward reaching vision-worthy actions, resistance (**R**) to change no matter how large can be overcome [**D x V x F > R**]. We who champion the health and well-being of women and children, families and fathers must dare to be more assertive and entrepreneurial in our anticipation of what lies ahead.

VALUE(S). Core values lift up what we do from dawn to dusk, and anchor the actions we demand from others. Having a defined set of core values enables us to be crystal clear about that which is non-negotiable. In the format of the recently resurrected (and soon to be retired) NPR series "This I Believe," here are a few of mine: I believe that science must trump ideology in the exercise of our profession. I believe that remaining silent in the face of injustice is unacceptable complicity. And I believe that that persistent passion and persuasion eventually persevere, if we stick with what is most important. How clearly can you tell me yours?

And let us not overlook the powerful double entendre of the word value, which reminds us that it isn't just about us. We also must ask: what is our notable worth, utility, desirability? How does MCH add value to the work of others? We must be able to manifest and measure our return on investment to be valuable to the larger community.

VITALITY (AND VIGOR). We cannot afford to be tired. Not now. This is the time for MCH to be known as an indefatigable "active and effective force" that fuels change. When MCH becomes truly vital to the expanding health care debate and the reinvention of public health, we will embody its core definition: "necessary to existence... indispensable, essential, and vital for a healthy society." And as the heart of public health, MCH can become the reliable engine of change for the greater good.

VOICE(S). This is no time for silence; too much is at stake. Bottom line: our voices must be in concert and be heard. Our collective contemporary voice must be clear and compelling about what is best for the women and children, families and father we serve. It also is our duty to give voice to those not oft heard and join voices with others sharing our vision and expression.

VALOR. The fifth V is quite an old fashioned word but one of my all time favorites: "boldness or determination in facing great danger." So many risks to health and home are converging that the usual prevention protocols are not enough. This is a time for personal pluck and professional prowess. As the economic stimulus is unpackaged and the push for complex systems change progresses, let's show folks in Washington and back home our MCH moxie and mettle and men and women of valor.

In the aftermath of inaugural jubilation, conditions are getting tough for the newly needy and tougher for folks long in need. These are times of dire warning and great possibility. How shall we respond to the Shofar's final call to action this serotinous Spring? I challenge us to start with these five tell-tale V's of leadership in action: vision, value, vitality, voice and valor.

Which reminds me to use my words responsibly one more time before we close. "Serotinous Spring"? Let me explain.

"Serotiny" is the behavior of some plant species that retain their non-dormant seeds in a cone for several years, but release them after exposure to fire. The cones protect the seeds from granivores and the heat generated by brush fires. Only intense fires melt the resins on the cone and release the seeds into the air, where they can remain viable for years.



A colleague with the Nature Conservancy once taught me about serotiny, about the goodness of fire. Her colleagues go around the world teaching people how to set fires to protect and preserve precious land. With a joyful glint in her eye, she would describe the striking sounds of exploding jack pine cones amidst intensely burning forests. Some of her sentences started with the unexpected phrase "... and another good thing about fire..." Reframing destruction, serotiny fills her with hope for abundant future forests.

For more than a decade we MCH folks have held on tight to our 'seeds' amidst political bushfires and persistent budgetary granivores. Our MCH resin has become pretty darn thick. But as this Spring's combustible double trouble of a bold new administration and unprecedented economic woes turns the heat way up, great opportunity awaits. The leadership challenge is to redefine a key variable in the aforementioned equation for transformative change: **D x V x F > R**. Borrowing from the Nature Conservancy, suppose **F= Fire**.

What fires can we set together to release long-lasting seeds of change? What vision-worthy actions might we take to kick start transformation for women, children and families? Imagine what would happen if our tightly closed MCH "cones" were to explode. Assured full access to quality care for each and all across the life course! Diminished inequities and lesser disparity of risk and adverse outcomes! Healthy women, healthier children, healthiest families in every home!

Seasons of fresh new growth would heartily follow and glorious green springs abound. If only we dare to ignite the world with unbridled creativity, conviction and courage.

Thank you for bringing me to this moment, which I embrace with humility, honor with remembrance and accept as a life-long call to action.



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