

Duane F. Alexander, M.D.: August 11, 1940–February 16, 2020

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A tireless advocate for children with disabilities and retired leader of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Dr. Duane Alexander passed away February 20, 2020. A native of Annapolis, M.D. he graduated from Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA. in 1962 and received his medical degree from Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Annapolis, M.D., in 1966 where he also completed his internship and residency in pediatrics. He joined NICHD in 1968 and also was a fellow in pediatrics focusing on developmental disabilities at the John F. Kennedy Institute for Habilitation of the Mentally

and Physically Handicapped Child (today known as the Kennedy Krieger Institute). He served as the Director of NICHD from 1986 until his retirement in 2000.

Dr. Alexander became an assistant to the scientific director in 1971 and was also an Assistant Secretary for Health in what is now the Department of Health and Human Services. He was active in the area of protection of human subjects and became NICHD Deputy Director in 1978. During that time, he was also a physician on the staff of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, whose recommendations form the basis of current HHS regulations that protect human subjects in research. After he served as NICHD Deputy Director he was acting director before becoming NICHD Director in 1986. For more than a decade, he also served as the United States' observer on the Steering Committee on Bioethics for the Council of Europe.

During his directorship of NICHD, Dr. Alexander initiated a number of studies in the areas of amniocentesis, early screening for developmental disability, and sudden infant death. His work in helping to prevent the maternal-to-child transmission of HIV in the United States is particularly important as is his work on genetic syndromes including Fragile X and Rett Syndrome.

In the area of autism research, Dr. Alexander played a critically important role in the establishment of the Collaborative Programs of Excellence in Autism (CPEA), which arose from federal legislation that resulted from family advocacy. He worked with program officer Marie Bristol Power in developing this highly innovative project to support the CPEA research program at ten institutions around the country. This work effort was essential in facilitating the growth of multidisciplinary work in autism and Dr. Alexander's support came at a time when federal backing for research was fairly limited and autism seemed to be a disorder "without an agency". His visionary approach involved collaborating with other agencies within NIH to foster autism research.

The CPEA network was funded through a second 5-year cycle. The primary goal of this program was to bring

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together expertise, infrastructure, and resources focused on major questions about autism. The research issues addressed include advanced techniques of diagnosis and assessment, population genetics and molecular biology, structural and functional brain imaging, animal models, behavioral and cognitive neuroscience, and focused interventions to elucidate the neurobiology of autism, with the long-term goal of effective diagnosis, treatment and prevention. The CPEAs linked scientists from the United States, Canada, Britain, and five other countries in the study of more than 2200 families over 10 years. As a result, the CPEAs amassed data on the genetic and phenotypic characteristics of the world's largest group of well-diagnosed persons with autism. Dr. Alexander's visionary CPEA leadership catapulted the science of autism forward and many of the advances emerging today stem from the unique experiences afforded by the CPEA to young scholars, whose collaborative work with senior investigators and other junior investigators laid the foundation for innovations and breakthroughs that continue to benefit many individuals with autism spectrum disorder. The funding of the network ended in 2007 when the NIH consolidated its funding for autism research into new programs.

Dr. Alexander's numerous awards included the USPHS Commendation Medal, a Meritorious Service Medal of Special Recognition, and the Surgeon General's Exemplary Service Medal. He also received the Arnold J. Capute award from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Dr. Nathan Davis Award for Outstanding Government Service from the American Medical Association. At the time of his retirement he held the rank of Assistant Surgeon General (Rear Admiral).

A farmer in his spare time, his generosity in sharing his produce with staff was legendary. Other interests included playing the tuba, reading, travel and spending time with his family including his wife Marianne, a son and daughter, their spouses, and his three grandsons.

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