

Interview with Dr. Philip Chen
Interviewer: Dr. Carl Kupfer
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Dr. Kupfer: This is the 21st of December 2005 and this is Dr. Kupfer and I'm sitting in Dr. Philip Chen's office and he has agreed to be interviewed for the history of the National Eye Institute (NEI). Phil you must be the main institutional memory of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) now.

Dr. Chen: Well if not the first then the second or the third (laughter).

Dr. Kupfer: Two episodes in my career as Director of the NEI were particularly wonderful experiences, one was being acting Director of the Fogarty for about seven or eight months and that was really great fun. But the one that really was of great interest and I think I learned a tremendous amount about the NIH structure was being the acting Deputy Director for Intramural Research. And that was about a year, maybe 13 months. I don't recall the details, I know that Ed Rall had been the Deputy Director for Intramural Research and for reasons that weren't clear, he and Bernadine Healey I guess didn't get along because one morning I had a call from her and she said I would like for you to be the Deputy Director and that was it.

Dr. Chen: Un-huh.

Dr. Kupfer: And when I first took that responsibility, quite frankly I was amazed at how few people were involved in the intramural research segment of the NIH. As far as I was concerned that was the most important part of NIH and here it was with two or three people and maybe one secretary as I remember.

Dr. Chen: Uh-huh.

Dr. Kupfer: And one of the first things—and you were very, very helpful to me of course, you really were able to answer practically any question I had to ask you. And one of the first things that I remember is that we recruited a young lady from Tony Fauci's office, an administrator, because I

don't think there was an administrator within the intramural program at that time. Is that a correct recollection?

Dr. Chen: Well, we had someone named Mary Ann Guerra ...

Dr. Kupfer: That's the one I was thinking of.

Dr. Chen: Yeah, who helped out but she didn't actually work here. I think she stayed in her previous job and she just helped out.

Dr. Kupfer: Oh, is that right? I see, I thought she was detailed.

Dr. Chen: Well, she might have been formally detailed, I'm not sure. I didn't think so.

Dr. Kupfer: Okay.

Dr. Chen: But she did help out in this office on some of these administrative things.

Dr. Kupfer: Right.

Dr. Chen: And she had helped, for example, work out this management controls self-assessment questionnaire.

Dr. Kupfer: Um-hum.

Dr. Chen: It was a way of doing the internal controls exercise for the intramural program. By having each scientific director fill out a large form every other year. Now we do it every year.

Dr. Kupfer: Right. Now I remember though, didn't she play some role in simplifying the bringing on of post-doctoral fellows? I remember that was a major complaint of the Scientific Directors of how long it took and I asked her to figure out a way.

Dr. Chen: I think vaguely. I think that what she probably did was workout out A-B-C steps because she had been an administrative officer in the intramural program in Cancer and in Allergy.

Dr. Kupfer: Right.

Dr. Chen: So I think she knew the kinds of essential steps that needed to be done and maybe eliminating some of the unnecessary steps.

Dr. Kupfer: Right.

Dr. Chen: Yeah. And eventually I think she became Executive Officer of an institute.

Dr. Kupfer: Is that right?

Dr. Chen: Maybe the Heart Institute

Dr. Kupfer: Is she still around, do you know?

Dr. Chen: No she went to work ultimately for Rick Klausner in the Cancer Institute. I think she might have been like the Executive Officer of the Cancer Institute. And then she left, but I understand just today or yesterday that she now works for Jeff Trent in Phoenix, Arizona.

Dr. Kupfer: Oh yes, yes.

Dr. Chen: In this new Genome Institute out there.

Dr. Kupfer: Isn't that interesting? Yeah, I've heard about Jeff Trent, he's wheeling and dealing.

Dr. Chen: Now you mentioned that you were surprised when Bernadine Healy called you up?

Dr. Kupfer: Yes.

Dr. Chen: And one thing I was speculating on, even back then is it might have had something to do with Bill Raub because you remember he was Deputy Director when Ed Rall was Deputy Director for Science (later called Deputy Director for Intramural Research).

Dr. Kupfer: I see.

Dr. Chen: And he had worked for you at one time in the Eye Institute?

Dr. Kupfer: Oh Yes, he was head of our extramural program.

Dr. Chen: And Bill Raub I know had told me once I know that he thought that Carl Kupfer was the most naturally gifted manager that he'd ever met (chuckle). So Bill Raub may have told Bernadine Healy that he respected you very highly as a manager and she may have taken him up on that.

Dr. Kupfer: Taken his advice because I didn't quite understand why she latched on to me.

Dr. Chen: Unfortunately, she later fired Bill Raub himself, as you remember.

Dr. Kupfer: No I didn't know that.

Dr. Chen: She fired Ed Rall and then later fired Bill Raub.

Dr. Kupfer: Is that right?

Dr. Chen: And so she got another deputy, I'm trying to think who it was. Oh, that's when Jay Moskowitz called himself Principal Deputy, remember?

Dr. Kupfer: Oh.

Dr. Chen: I don't know if you'd been appointed yet, acting as deputy, but he took it upon himself to call himself Principal Deputy.

Dr. Kupfer: Oh.

Dr. Chen: Which didn't endear himself too well to a lot of people. But I think that might be why you were asked.

Dr. Kupfer: That must have been—that makes sense because otherwise she really had no interaction with me and I was a small institute.

Dr. Chen: And eventually there was a search committee which came up with the name of Lance Liotta.

Dr. Kupfer: Right.

Dr. Chen: From Cleveland, the city where she came from and so she picked him.

Dr. Kupfer: Well there were several things that happened during that time, for instance Jim Watson suddenly resigned.

Dr. Chen: Yes.

Dr. Kupfer: And she said to me you've got to find someone to take care of the genome project. And everyone I identified as being a possibility turned out to be on contract rather than a member of the government. And finally we came up with a good person. That's an interesting scenario.

Dr. Chen: Well let me tell you something that not too many people know. Bernadine Healy used to be my graduate student's girlfriend when she was in college. I was an assistant professor at the University of Rochester and during the summer we would bring in college students to work just like around here.

Dr. Kupfer: Right.

Dr. Chen: And she was one of these students from Vassar.

Dr. Kupfer: Isn't that interesting.

Dr. Chen: And she became my graduate student's girlfriend and they were really pretty close together during that summer.

Dr. Kupfer: Uh-huh.

Dr. Chen: Eventually they parted ways.

Dr. Kupfer: Right.

Dr. Chen: I reminded her of this later and she remembered (laughter).

Dr. Kupfer: Well she really took on a number of people, I remember she brought in a lot of new people into Building 1.

Dr. Chen: Yes.

Dr. Kupfer: And then she took on a number of Congressional Committees that didn't sit too well with anyone.

Dr. Chen: You know she changed the tenor of the way things were done around here and she had her own crew of staff that she had brought in.

Dr. Kupfer: Right.

Dr. Chen: I think it was during that period that Richard Wyatt and myself who had earlier been fairly close to the immediate office of the Director's staff kind of got pushed off into the periphery.

Dr. Kupfer: I remember that.

Dr. Chen: And of course the job of Deputy Director for—Intramural Research was changed in name from Deputy Director for Science to Deputy Director for Intramural Research.

Dr. Kupfer: Uh-huh.

Dr. Chen: Somewhere around this time. I mean you would have been the principal interface with her, and then we would have to interact with you.

Dr. Kupfer: Yes.

Dr. Chen: And it's been that way since. Like Lance would interface with her and then we in turn with him, and then later Michael Gottesman was the same way. Richard Wyatt and I don't have much to

do with the immediate office of the Director. But see this office which you mentioned as being a fairly small one is now a gigantic office. It's got well over a hundred people.

Dr. Kupfer: Is that right?

Dr. Chen: It's got the Office of Technology Transfer, the Office of Human Subjects Research, the Office of Animal Care and Use, the Office of Loan Repayment and Scholarship, the Office of Intramural Training and Education, etc.

Dr. Kupfer: I see.

Dr. Chen: Now the History Office and NIH Museum, so it's a huge bureaucracy now.

Dr. Kupfer: Isn't that amazing? A hundred people.

Dr. Chen: Well over a hundred.

Dr. Kupfer: Well over a hundred. And when I was there I think there may have been five or six people.

Dr. Chen: When I came in the spring of 1974 with Dr. Stetten, it was that size.

Dr. Kupfer: Right.

Dr. Chen: We came from NIGMS.

Dr. Kupfer: Right.

Dr. Chen: And there were about five people.

Dr. Kupfer: Right.

Dr. Chen: So, it didn't change for many years and then all of the sudden its gotten to be a big business.

Dr. Kupfer: Right. The other aspect of being Acting Deputy Director which I found very, very revealing was sitting as the Chair of the Scientific Directors every other week.

Dr. Chen: Yes.

Dr. Kupfer: And I remember the fact that it was very, very clear to me that as far as the Scientific Directors were concerned, they ran NIH. They were NIH. What went on in Extramural and Contracts really didn't matter. It's what went on in the intramural laboratories that really counted. And to a certain extent I bought into that because that's really where the science was. I know on the other hand they really had a tremendous amount of power in terms of promotions, for instance,

and I remember there was a discussion about a woman in the Cancer Institute who was a surgeon and had done very, very good research. She came up for promotion and the question was raised well, did she do the research or was it someone else's idea that she did? I'd never heard that brought up before in a discussion about a promotion, but since she was a woman they thought it was important to raise this. And I forget who was bringing her to the Scientific Directors, who was the Scientific Director at that time, but he took umbrage to that and he said I don't bring people here unless they've really done the research themselves. And there was a reluctance to vote on it. And I said well I understand that whatever you say I can override and I'm telling you right now that I'm going to approve her. I think it was the only time I really asserted undue influence. Do you recall that episode at all?

Dr. Chen: It might have been...

Dr. Kupfer: You sat in on it.

Dr. Chen: Yes, it might have been Al Rabson's case I think because he was I mean there were a couple of Scientific Directors for Cancer.

Dr. Kupfer: Right. That's a good point. I could ask Al as I am planning to see him.

Dr. Chen: Yes talk to him and see if that was the case. Well, you're quite right about the former power of the Scientific Directors and the Deputy Director for Intramural Research (or the Deputy Director for Science). When Shannon was Director, the most powerful second person at NIH was the Deputy Director for Science.

Dr. Kupfer: And that was Berliner.

Dr. Chen: No, it was initially Bo Mider.

Dr. Kupfer: Bo Mider, that's right.

Dr. Chen: Smadel, Bo Mider, then Berliner. And the Deputy Director was just kind of a functionary who gave speeches and so on. And within the institutes, the Scientific Directors were the powerhouses. But this actually started to change before Healy. I think it started to change under Jim Wyngaarden who was her predecessor. And Wyngaarden had the notion that maybe since

the Institute directors were responsible for the entire domain—Intramural and Extramural, that they should be the power and the Scientific Director should be beholden to them. So I think the philosophy was starting to change and Healy just accelerated it. And now—then under Harold Varmus and now under Elias Zerhouni that's still the case--that the Scientific Directors' are subservient to the Institute Directors. They still wield some power on promotions, but that power has partially been nullified by this new tenure track and tenure process and so the final voting on recommending for tenure is no longer assigned to the Scientific Directors. It's a new committee called the Central Tenure Committee (CTC) which is chaired by Mike Gottesman and it makes a recommendation to Gottesman. Gottesman, as Deputy Director for Intramural Research, has the power of course to sign it just like you did, and he could override the CTC if he wanted to, but he generally follows their advice.

Dr. Kupfer: Right.

Dr. Chen: So I would say that the power has shifted from the Scientific Directors to the Central Tenure Committee for tenure. The Scientific Directors still have a lot of power in the budgetary and resource allocation, but even in that they're subservient to the Institute Directors.

Dr. Kupfer: It's interesting that you bring this up because I always viewed—the first Scientific Director NEI had was Jin Kinoshita, who was a gem. He was a gentleman, he was an excellent scientist and he respected the scientists with whom he worked. And he never took advantage of them, he didn't even have a laboratory himself because he felt he had done his research and what he wanted to do was help the young people be successful.

Dr. Chen: Yeah.

Dr. Kupfer: But the other Scientific Directors whether they were in the NEI or in other Institutes really were in competition with the people they were supposed to supervise and in the case in the Eye Institute each Scientific Director was also head of the lab and put tremendous resources into his own lab and made it very difficult for those who had to abide by whatever decisions were made. And I thought that was a major weakness of the Intramural Program. Very hard to correct.

Dr. Chen: So now any Institute Director who does research has to be reviewed by another Institute (by the Board of Scientific Counselors of a different institute) and I think they even get their resources from the other institute. The Scientific Director I think can still be in the same institute, but I'm not sure whether the resources can be assigned by themselves or not. I have a feeling that that's shifted a little bit. I don't know if that's added any more clout to the Institute Director.

Dr. Kupfer: Yes. Well anyway, that was a wonderful experience for me and I wondered if you had any comments on what impact that that period of 12 or 13 months had. I mean was that in a sense somewhat destabilizing for you? You had been in this position for a long time and...

Dr. Chen: Yeah. I myself had no problem. I think it might have been a little more unsettling to Richard—you know Richard Wyatt?

Dr. Kupfer: Sure.

Dr. Chen: But I worked well with you and we always got along well. I mean we worked together since '74 since you were acting Scientific Director of NEI when I first came to work for Dr. Stetten.

Dr. Kupfer: That's right.

Dr. Chen: And "Hans" Stetten was the Chair, so I knew you from way back. Of course we were sort of destabilized in the sense that we were kind of pushed out of the immediate office of the Director's daily activities. We used to attend, Richard Wyatt and myself, Jim Wyngaarden's OD staff meetings. We had lunch with the other Associate Directors. There was a lot more camaraderie...

Dr. Kupfer: Um-hum, yes.

Dr. Chen: Among the old guard back then. I think when Bernadine Healy came the dynamics changed as we were just talking about. She bought in a lot of her own people and uh...

Dr. Kupfer: But she also did something else which really caught me unawares and I still don't know what the basis of it was. You remember she approached Rick Klausner to do some sort of analysis of the Intramural Program unbeknownst to me and he was doing this analysis and people were wondering what my role was in it and I knew nothing about it. That was not an unusual way for

Bernadine to act and yet she was—she confided in me all the problems she was having, and how difficult it was and how people were trying to pull her down and then when I finished that acting role she wrote me a beautiful letter telling me how—yet she developed a relationship with Rick Klausner to do an analysis of the Intramural Program about which I knew nothing.

Dr. Chen: Oh.

Dr. Kupfer: I thought that was most unusual.

Dr. Chen: Now that was because I didn't know this until now. And this analysis interestingly is called the Klausner Report.

Dr. Kupfer: Right.

Dr. Chen: But another person who was in on that report is you know who? Michael Gottesman.

Dr. Kupfer: Oh.

Dr. Chen: It was a Klausner-Gottesman thing I think. They came up with this notion of scientific faculties or what became known now as special interest groups and things like that. So this was surprising to me that she did this without your knowledge.

Dr. Kupfer: It was a surprise to me too. (Laughter)

Dr. Chen: Yeah. Huh. That's very interesting. (Laughter)

Dr. Kupfer: She was a very complicated person.

Dr. Chen: Yes very complicated. And I know that Tom Malone I think had once met her first husband somewhere and had gotten some interesting comments from him about her (chuckles).

Dr. Kupfer: Yeah.

Dr. Chen: But she was a medical school classmate of uh—I think it might have taken Michael Gottesman an extra year at Harvard but they overlapped somehow at Harvard and she was a classmate of George Khoury and she and her first husband Greg Bulkley were friends with George Khoury I know.

Dr. Kupfer: Right.

Dr. Chen: Yup.

Dr. Kupfer: Okay. Now uh, the person who came in was Lance Liotta, but he didn't stay an awful long time did he?

Dr. Chen: No. He was fired by Harold Varmus when Varmus came as Director.

Dr. Kupfer: Yeah.

Dr. Chen: And replaced Bernadine Healy.

Dr. Kupfer: Right.

Dr. Chen: He, I think was the uh, he was recommended for the job by a search committee that I think was chaired by Toni Fauci if I'm not mistaken. Either Fauci was chair or a member of the committee and maybe Klausner was in on the committee too I'm not sure, but they did have a search in which Lance Liotta came up as the candidate of choice. And he mentioned to me once that he thought he might have gotten the job because he prepared this big notebook on all the things he thought needed to be done in the intramural program. And I thought he was a well-qualified person who somehow didn't fit well under Varmus. As soon as Varmus got here he eventually appointed Michael Gottesman. They had both worked under the same mentor, Ira Pastan of the Cancer Institute.

Dr. Kupfer: Yes, very interesting. Let's change gears for a moment. Ed McManus has been working very hard on trying to formulate the strategic planning that the Eye Institute did very much in his bailiwick and Julian Morris was also very much involved in that and of course Bill Raub was very much involved in that. And Ed asked me to see whether his recollection was correct that you worked with Hans Stetten in NIGMS.

Dr. Chen: Yes.

Dr. Kupfer: As the Program Project?

Dr. Chen: No, I was Associate Director for Program Planning and Evaluation.

Dr. Kupfer: Right. And he wanted to know what your thoughts were about the way Program Planning and Evaluation was done in those days as compared to how it is being done now. And whether you had any opinions about the way NEI did it.

Dr. Chen: Well, when I finished the Grants Associate's Program in 1968, I joined the Office of Program Planning and Evaluation in Building 1 under Tom Kennedy. So for four years I worked in that office doing a wide variety of different administrative things. And it was from that job that Dr. Stetten recruited me to be Associate Director for Program Planning and Evaluation at NIGMS.

Dr. Kupfer: Um-hum.

Dr. Chen: Now, I was only there for two years before he was asked to come here as Deputy Director of Science. And so during that period I mainly worked with all the different Extramural Programs, prepared opening statements for the Congress and testimony and things like that. I did various kinds of writing, but I never worked on a strategic plan.

Dr. Kupfer: I see.

Dr. Chen: The NIGMS really didn't have a strategic plan that I knew of. So I think that the Eye Institute's strategic plan and the Heart Institute's strategic plan and some of these other institutes had really gone much further than we did at NIGMS.

Dr. Kupfer: Right, Right.

Dr. Chen: And some of it was really quite good.

Dr. Kupfer: Yeah. When we interviewed Tom Kennedy, of course he said that what was strategic planning and program planning in your day, and Tom Kennedy said we didn't do anything like that. (Laughter). We would analyze data but we weren't planning anything. You can't plan as far as he was concerned.

Dr. Chen: No. But they did prepare papers, you know, on different topics so that you could see that it was useful to know what information was available about a subject.

Dr. Kupfer: Okay. Well, Ed would be happy to know that I asked the question.

Dr. Chen: Good, yeah.

Dr. Kupfer: Is there anything else you would like to say about your perspective of the NEI during the 1970-2000 era?

Dr. Chen: Well, uh.

Dr. Kupfer: If its bad you can say it too. Its okay (laughter).

Dr. Chen: Well I know that you were probably one of the longest lived institute directors in the history of NIH and so you had your fingers on the Institute Directorship, the scientific leadership of the Intramural Program, the clinical programs and of course we did hear that you were a very strong personality. You knew what was going on. And maybe some of the people in some of the other jobs, you know like the Clinical Director's job and so forth may have thought that you had your finger in probably a little bit too much I supposed. I think that Vernon Wong might have been one of those people who thought that he didn't really have enough power while he was Clinical Director. I seem to recall that.

Dr. Kupfer: Yeah.

Dr. Chen: But I can recall the Institute prospering under your leadership.

Dr. Kupfer: Well there's no doubt that I was very strong-willed, I don't deny that (chuckles). And I also recognized the tremendous power that an Institute Director has.

Dr. Chen: Oh yeah, nationally.

Dr. Kupfer: It's incredible. Uh, John Sherman told me that when he was recruiting me. He said you're going to enjoy yourself.

Dr. Chen: Yeah.

Dr. Kupfer: And it was a wonderful, uh.... Let me ask you one question that isn't generally known. There was a very important question early on when I was asked and accepted the position, before I actually came here physically as to how the Neurology Institute was going to divest itself of the vision component of their program, the blindness if you will.

Dr. Chen: Yeah.

Dr. Kupfer: Did you know anything about what went on there?

Dr. Chen: No, nothing. I know that the Eye Institute programs at the inception were carved out of NINDB.

Dr. Kupfer: Right, right. But you don't know the role that Bob Berliner played in it or that sort of thing right?

Dr. Chen: No. I was not privy to that.

Dr. Kupfer: Well, you'll enjoy reading about it. It's quite a story.

Dr. Chen: Okay. Well, Berliner I knew. Because when I was in the Intramural Program in the Heart Institute he was my Scientific Director.

Dr. Kupfer: Right, right. Exactly.

Dr. Chen: And the one thing I remembered about him—we used to call him the CDM. The Clean Desk Man, because when we went into his office to ask him for permission to go on a trip or something, he had absolutely nothing on his desk—it was the opposite of this (laughter). I don't know how he kept records or anything. It was completely free of any piece of paper, or pencil or anything.

Dr. Kupfer: Isn't that amazing.

Dr. Chen: He was the Scientific Director of the National Heart Institute. This was back in '56-'59.

Dr. Kupfer: Isn't that interesting.

Dr. Chen: Yeah.

Dr. Kupfer: Well, Phil, it's wonderful chatting with you and I think one of the most enjoyable aspects of the Deputy Director was working with you. You're a wonderful person.

Dr. Chen: That's heart-warming to hear, Carl.

Dr. Kupfer: No really. You were very supportive. You accepted my ignorance in certain things and straightened me out which was very valuable.

End of Transcript