

Leventhal, Carl 2004

Dr. Carl Leventhal Oral History 2004

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Interview Dr. Carl Leventhal

Conducted by Dr. Carl Kupfer

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Dr. Kupfer: Why don't we just talk for a bit and then I'll play it back to be sure it's recording, but I think it should work pretty well. I was particularly interested in how Bob Berliner was the main individual who oversaw the transfer of grants from Neurology to Eye. I think you commented that the person who would be best to talk about that would be Murray Goldstein and he's also on our list to be interviewed.

Dr. Leventhal: Let me just recall the history initially. Bob Marston became the Director of NIH 1968; he had previously directed the Health Manpower Division at NIH and was later Director of the PHS Health Services Administration for a short time before being selected as NIH Director. It was one of those things where they thought they had the right guy so they moved him to the NIH. In the course of that year or two the Public Health Service (PHS) initially, and subsequently NIH as a result, underwent an elaborate reorganization. The key point of that reorganization in terms of its impact on the NIH was that a previous PHS Bureau structure in which the National Library of Medicine had been an independent bureau theoretically at the same echelon as the NIH. So, the library had been an independent bureau parallel to the NIH which obviously was far bigger and had a far bigger budget. Other bureaus dealt with health manpower and had some responsibility for the federal program of scholarships for medical students. These changes were brought about by the Health Manpower Act of, I think 1968, and led to a very major expansion of medical schools in the United States. I think you remember that time. There was a program of capitation in which federal funds were made available on a per student basis to all new schools and as well to all schools which expanded. There was an enormous federal incentive for a growth of the medical educational system and the federal underwriting of it. I think probably a doubling of the capacity of medical schools from the mid-60s until the early 70s.

In federal organization charts the NIH became an agency of the department had under it in the traditional terminology, three bureaus. One was the National Library of Medicine, and the second was the Bureau of Manpower and the third was what was the old NIH and the organization of the Director's office followed from that in a parallel way. So, Bob Berliner had been called the Director of Laboratories and Clinics; his predecessors were Bo Mider in the 60s and Joe Smadel in the late 50s and early 60s. In conjunction with the reorganization they decided to create a new title for Bob which was Deputy Director for Science. There was this sort of trioka of management of the NIH under the leadership of the Director, Bob Marston who had under him then two deputies. There was Berliner who was Deputy Director for Science and John Sherman who was just simply Deputy Director. But they really worked together so closely and in such a harmonic relationship that it was very hard to sort out who did what or what the discrete jobs were. Now concerning the NEI development you know, one of my great favorite quotes was from Bob Marston in the late 60s early 70s. Bob Marston said, "We are going to resist the formation of the Eye Institute and the further fragmentation of the NIH just as hard as we can. And if and when we lose we're going to create the best Eye Institute in the United States or in the world." It was interesting because he was prepared for his judgment to be reversed and had his team on board to say that we were going to do everything possible to make this change, that we were dragged into kicking and screaming, as effective and successful as it could possibly be. When the Eye Institute was being formed both during the search committee and selection of a Director and various recruitment things that was considered really very much within Bob's province. He was very intimately involved in it—which I'm sure you can recall. Even when you were being interviewed, you spent a lot of time with Bob.

Dr. Kupfer: Well, that's a good run-down Carl and I think that clarifies it. And I like the quote of Bob Marston because John Sherman actually sort of confirmed the idea that although NIH was against the creation of new institutes, if one was going to come along it had better be good.

Dr. Leventhal: We were not going to make it an orphan child.

Dr. Kupfer: And their concern according to John Sherman was, would they be able to first of all, find someone who would take the job and if the person who took the job had the organizational ability and leadership ability to put together a strong organization.

Dr. Leventhal: Well, let me just reflect a little bit on the actually recruitment because I think it is very interesting and John probably mentioned some of the same things but he and I sort of ran the search committee. The issue was that insofar as we were reluctant to see the Eye Institute form, there had been a very effective lobby in the academic ophthalmologic community to create an Eye Institute and one of the challenges was to get one of the leaders of that movement to accept the job, which was kind of like calling their bluff, but it just didn't work. None of them wanted to go that one additional step.

Dr. Kupfer: I understand. Carl perhaps you are aware of this, but when we interviewed Bernie Becker. You remember Bernie Becker don't you?

Dr. Leventhal: I remember his name. Was he from Wash U?

Dr. Kupfer: That's right. Well, he made the point that he was agitating for more money for vision research in the Neurology Institute...

Dr. Leventhal: And not organizational change?

Dr. Kupfer: Well, no—and organizational change too. And he wrote directly to the Director of the NIH who at that time during the 60s of course was Shannon. And Shannon must have talked to the head of the Neurology Institute, Masland. And Masland approached Bernie and said, I am prepared to appoint you as my Deputy Director in charge of vision research in the Neurology Institute and your budget for that will come directly from Director of the NIH. Are you familiar with that?

Dr. Leventhal: No.

Dr. Kupfer: No, It's an interesting because it fits in directly with what you said.

Dr. Leventhal : No, I'm talking about a period that probably would have been four or five years later.

Dr. Kupfer: Right. Okay, then listen, that's very, very helpful Carl and I thank you. And what I'm going to do is I'm going to send you this statement that you have agreed to give this oral history and I'm going to send it to your home address which I have. That's 10924 Brewer House Road in Rockville.

Dr. Leventhal: Well you know I'm not going to be there for about three weeks.

Dr. Kupfer: Oh, I understand and that's fine.

Dr. Leventhal: Is there anything else Carl, that I could be helpful with? You asked me about this electron microscope story and I've been racking my brain trying to remember. And I know that Sallmon was an electron microscopist right?

Dr. Kupfer: Well, yes, he did the histology. But...

Dr. Leventhal: Well presumed that this is the electron microscope that he...

Dr. Kupfer: No, he didn't have access to one except in some other building. He was a part of Neurology. But that we were going to be recruiting an electron microscopist and the argument was that Bob, very graciously I must say, gave us 8600 square feet on the second floor of Building 6 and just said just put he scope there. And everyone I turned to said for goodness sake in a building that was built in 1938, the stability wasn't very good and that you were going to get in an awful lot of trouble trying to get rid of vibration. So why don't you put it in the basement where the original Cancer Institute, which was in Building 6 had their electron microscope and that was my argument to Bob. And Bob for reasons that were never clear did not want to give up that space in the basement and finally he gave in.

Dr. Leventhal: Do you remember Bob Cohen who was the Clinical Director of the Mental Health Institute?

Dr. Kupfer: I know the name, I vaguely remember.

Dr. Leventhal: Well, he and John Eberhart who worked very closely together—I forget which one it was—it might have been John Eberhart had a sign over his desk for management responsibility, which said, "Space is love." Which is kind of a slogan because all the scientist wanted was just some more space and all the administrators wanted to hold on to it so that they could use it as a plum for someone else.

Dr. Kupfer: Well, I know someone else who had a sign over his desk elsewhere, not at the NIH, and it said, "Take my wife, but don't touch my space." So, there you are. Well listen thanks so much Carl very much and have a safe trip. Have you been to China before?

Dr. Leventhal: No, no, I've never been to Asia at all.

Dr. Kupfer: So you're going there for the first time? That will be wonderful.

Dr. Leventhal: We're touring for about four weeks. We're going to the classic five cities, Peking, Beijing, and Shanghai and so forth and then we're taking the classic Yangtze River cruise.

Dr. Kupfer: Right, terrific. Have a safe trip and enjoy it and thanks again.

End of Interview