

Birt Harvey, MD

Pediatric Practice, Palo Alto
Chapter 1 Chair, 1972-74
District IX Chair, 1982-87
AAP President, 1989-90

His Presidential address can be found in *Pediatrics* 1991; 87:1-5

Excerpts from the address:

“The health status of children in this country is deteriorating...(W)hy...are we unable to maintain the health status of our children?”

HISTORY

The history of federal involvement in children’s issues...dates to early in this century...President Theodore Roosevelt called the first White House Conference on Children in 1909...

...(S)econd White House Conference on Children in 1919...stimulated the Sheppard-Towner Act, the first federal legislation designed to promote child health through a modest state grant program. [*Ed.note: AMA opposition to this act led to the formation of the AAP by disaffected pediatricians.*]

In 1935 the Social Security Act brought federally aided health and welfare programs for dependent children to all states...Title V ...is the basis for many current child health services...

INTERCONNECTEDNESS

Child health cannot be considered...isolated from other children’s issues. Child health is primarily a socioeconomic problem with health consequences. For disadvantaged children, improved family living standards may have more effect on health status than receipt of health care...

Although all children’s issues should be addressed by a comprehensive national children’s policy, one facet that is pressing and that can be tackled initially is child health...

PROBLEMS WITH THE CURRENT SYSTEM

Child health is a pressing issue because of disorganized administrative and delivery systems, inequities in access to care, and rapidly changing child health needs...

The federal government has more than 100 programs serving children...Almost every program has different standards, eligibility criteria, and delivery methods...(same for states)...

Nongovernmental child advocacy groups—also fragmented by an interest in a specific disease, age, geographic, or economic group---...tend to have limited ...integration into the child health system...

Our system is above all inequitable...

Even among those children covered by ...insurance, coverage is often inadequate...

A CHILD HEALTH POLICY

...Access to preventive care and therapeutic medical and dental care for all children must be a goal and a cornerstone of a child health policy. Current proposals to achieve universal insurance coverage...(a)ll fail...to address universal eligibility and adequacy of benefits...

We have the option of continuing a slow, laborious, incremental approach to modify our existing system—often known as tinkering—or the opportunity to take a bold, rapid—but meticulously planned—comprehensive new approach. The time is ripe for a bold step. Public policy leaders, the business community, and the public all realize that the health needs of our children are not being adequately addressed. This convergence of interests and needs offers us a unique opportunity that should not be lost.”

Biographical Notes

As related to Norman Lewak (April 2006)

Birt started his Pediatric training at Stanford, 1955-57, when it was in San Francisco. During that time, they had a rotation in Palo Alto. He enjoyed the Palo Alto experience so that after finishing his residency at Columbia, 1957-58, he came back to Palo Alto for practice.

He got involved with the chapter in 1963-64. The School Health committee had recommended against sex education in the schools. Birt disagreed with this. He talked with Bruce Johnston (chapter chair 1966-69). Birt thinks the discussion would have been at a chapter meeting. Bruce added Birt to the committee. Subsequently, the committee changed its stance.

In 1969, Birt was asked to run for alternate chapter chairman by the nominating committee. When Birt asked about the duties of the alternate chair (vice president), he was told that there were no duties except to be available to replace the chair. So Birt was surprised to find out, after the election (from Mish Grossman who was the previous alternate chair), that it would be his job to set up the meetings. There was one chapter meeting a year, mostly educational. This has continued as the spring meeting. Previous to Birt being in charge of the meetings, it had been in a variety of sites. Birt started rotating it between Monterey, Yosemite, & Tahoe. A few years later, Yosemite canceled out because the park stopped taking groups in the spring and summer. After that (sometime when Marty Gershman was chair—1978-81) Monterey became the single site.

It is interesting to note that the Monterey, Yosemite, Tahoe alternation has been tried again. Another activity which has been tried again was having the chapter chair meet with the pediatricians in outlying areas. Birt remembers traveling with Mel Schwartz (who was his alternate chair) to Fresno, Sacramento, and Santa Rosa to meet with the locals.

Birt's major memories relate to legislation. Because of our geographic location, the chapter has always taken the lead on legislative activities. During Alex Hatoff's time (when Birt was the alternate chair) the three California chairs (No. Cal, So. Cal., San Diego) got together and hired a lobbyist through the recommendation of Glenn Austin & Leo Bell. Birt believes that this was through their CMA affiliation. This lobbyist did very little, so when Birt became chapter chair, he found Elizabeth Berger to lobby for us. Liz served for many years as our lobbyist (we could only afford part-time) as well as the “face” of the California Children's Lobby.

After being our chapter chair, Birt officially took the lead on legislation for the District when he became Alternate District Chair (1976-82). Previous to that, Saul Robinson, as District Chair had been the legislative coordinator, but the new District

Chair in 1976, Paul Wehrle, turned the job over to Birt. Birt continued to lead when he became District chair (1982-88) but he also involved Marty Gershman, who had become the Alternate District Chair. Marty became District Chair in 1989 (and Birt became AAP President). Around that time, Marty got Bob Black to be the lead person on legislation as the District legislative chair, which has continued to the present day.

During Birt's years, the legislators learned to trust the AAP's input since Birt led us in convincing the legislators that we spoke for the benefit of children rather than for the self interest of physicians. We were also trusted because all the AAP in California spoke with one voice--Birt insisted that the Chapters only address state issues through the District. Although we had a District legislative committee to sort through the hundreds of bills that Birt and Liz brought to us, Birt instituted a system of using various committee chairs to bring expertise to aid in the bill review and serve to testify in legislative committees, examples being Dave Chadwick on child abuse and Joe Davis on adoptions.

Some of the legislation Birt recalled:

- 1) Law holding physicians harmless for immunization reactions with the state paying for complications. This was in 1977 and continued until it was superceded by the federal vaccine act.
- 2) Labeling of hot water heaters.
- 3) Mumps and Rubella vaccination requirement for school. Also an act stating that schools would not lose their funding for a child who was excluded from school because he/she didn't have these vaccines.
- 4) If a store (apparently Tower Records did this) sold drug paraphernalia, it had to have a separate room for this activity. Admission to this room required proof of adulthood.
- 5) CHDP worked out with Willie Brown (when he chaired the assembly ways and means committee) and his aide Steve Thompson (who later became the chief lobbyist for the CMA). At first it was only for EPSDT preventative services and EPSDT eligible kids (national Medicaid) and later expanded to include follow-up services and for kids up to 200% of poverty. The original form that the state created was very complicated, having 114 boxes to fill out. It needed extremely small print to get it on one legal sized page. Birt recruited Marty Gershman to massively simplify the form, which he did and the state accepted it. The current form is a direct descendent of Marty's work.
- 6) The Papan bill was passed by the legislature in 1984 and then vetoed by the Governor. This would have mandated that insurance cover all services on the AAP periodicity table.
- 7) CCS name change from Crippled Children's Services to California Children's Services. Birt notes that this was Liz Berger's doing.
- 8) Helped George Cunningham with the expansion of newborn screening and the designation of only three regional labs (plus Kaiser) for this—previously it could be any contracted lab.