

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

Oliver E. Byrd

(1906-1998)

Oliver E. Byrd, Ed.D, M.D., Professor and Chair Emeritus, Department of Health Education, Stanford School of Education, died on May 16, 1998 in Palo Alto. He was 92. Known by all as “Tex”, he was one of the early 20th century pioneers who focused on ways to educate people effectively about disease and health. He was an unfailing advocate of the need for people to manage their own health. Using contemporary terms, he was a strong advocate of health promotion and disease prevention, foreshadowing an area of research and training now well established at Stanford University.

He was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, shortly before his father’s death, with the surviving family then moving to San Antonio, Texas. Lack of money led to placement in an orphanage for 4 years, then leaving to live with his grandfather and later with his mother and stepfather. Tex proved to be an excellent student academically and athletically, earning letters in two sports. His accomplishments led to a scholarship to Stanford in 1925, participating on the track team and majoring in economics. After graduation he taught 5th grade in a private school to earn money and did some graduate work in business administration. He returned to Stanford to earn an M.A. in hygiene and physical education in 1933 and later an Ed.D. in health education in 1940. During this time he realized how much he enjoyed teaching, accepting a position at San Mateo Junior College to teach biology and health, also becoming the track and field team coach. Over five years his athletes set 16 junior college world records.

In 1937 he returned to Stanford as an instructor in physical education, declining the offer to become the Stanford varsity track and field coach. Instead with the strong encouragement of Ray Lyman Wilbur, president of Stanford at the time and a former president of the American Medical Association, he entered medical school all the while continuing to teach at Stanford. In 1947 he earned an M.D. from the University of California School of Medicine. Declining a surgery residency program at UC, he continued at Stanford, founding its first health education program and serving as its Chair until retiring in 1971.

During his career at Stanford he earned many distinctions and honors. He authored or co-authored over 80 books on health, school health, and medical and health information. He received the American Medical Association’s Distinguished Service Award in 1966 and the International Certificate of Merit for Distinguished Service to School Health and Health Education in 1968. In 1971 he was commended by the California State Assembly for his achievements in school health and health education. Eta

Sigma Gamma, the national health science honorary society, awarded him in 1991 the National Honor Award for his many achievements in the field of health education.

One of the most significant accomplishments of Oliver Byrd was the creation of an information system, perhaps the first, designed to disseminate medical information about health and disease to health professionals and to the general public. With the help of family members and a few friends he launched a system to rewrite technical knowledge from medical and health journals in language that could be more readily understood and applied. Over several years this system included the professional literature not only in medicine but also in education, behavioral sciences and public health fields as well. The effort to create and disseminate such information, amassed from a broad sweep of literally hundreds of journals, before computer technology had become commonly available was truly an extraordinary feat.

Oliver Byrd possessed an abiding belief that teaching is for the future while medicine takes care of the present. While he greatly admired the achievements of medical science and allied fields to serve those in need of treatment, his passion lay in preventing problems and educating the general public in ways to take better care of themselves, thus reducing the need for medical care. Such passion is now commonly shared by many healthcare professionals spanning several disciplines. His pioneering energy and his enthusiasm along with his many contributions for health promotion and disease prevention well deserve our admiration and our gratitude.

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by courtesy of Psychology,
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