

# In Memoriam: James Harlan Steele (1913—2013)

*[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.*

[Jennifer McQuiston/Casey Barton Behravesh] I'm Dr. Casey Barton Behravesh, and I'm Dr. Jennifer McQuiston, and today we're talking with Dr. Myron Schultz about his In Memoriam honoring the legendary Dr. James Harlan Steele. Welcome Dr. Schultz.

[Myron Schultz] Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

[Casey Barton Behravesh] I had the good fortune to meet Dr. Steele in 1999 while I was a student at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, at their school of public health, where Dr. Steele was Professor Emeritus. The first day I met Dr. Steele I barged into his office to ask him for advice on whether or not I should go to veterinary school or finish my graduate studies. And Dr. Steele just stared at me for a minute and then he says "you've got good teeth, you're young. Go to veterinary school now!" For the non-veterinarians, that's a classic way a veterinarian tells how old somebody is. We both started laughing and instantly, from that day forward, he was my mentor.

Dr. Schultz, when did *you* first meet Dr. Steele?

[Myron Schultz] My meeting with Dr. Steele was so unique that it brings a smile to my face every time I think about it. I was a veterinary student at Cornell University and I was young, very impressionable. I was enamored with medical science. I never had any encounter with medical science until veterinary school and I decided that I wanted more and I wanted to do that by going into medicine and I decided at the same time that I would specialize in zoonoses—diseases transmitted from animals to man.

At that time no one knew what the word zoonoses meant and I had no opportunity to consult with anybody about my decision. But in my junior year I picked up a veterinary journal that had an article all about zoonoses and it had a picture of the author of the article in it and it gave me great encouragement. I knew that somewhere in this world someone else was interested in this problem. Well, if you fast forward 7 years to the day I arrived at CDC, I stepped into Dr. Steele's office for the first time and there I saw the man whose picture was on the article and I was thrilled. I knew I was in the right place and with all the other wonderful features of being an EIS officer working under Dr. Langmuir and Dr. Steele I was very happy at that. So that was my first encounter with Dr. Steele and it was a friendship that lasted for over 50 years.

[Jennifer McQuiston] Many people around the world have great memories of Dr. Steele. I first encountered him very soon after I started working at CDC as a young Epidemic Intelligence Service officer, you mentioned that, Dr. Schultz, it's also known as EIS; that was in 1998. And he often visited CDC during the annual EIS conference, and I can remember, not only his big booming voice and his infectious smile, but how excited he was to talk to me and others and how he encouraged the new veterinary EIS officers in their work. What's your favorite memory of Dr. Steele?

[Myron Schultz] I don't have one favorite memory. I have many favorite memories because my friendship with him was so rich and rewarding for me. Let me just account a few of them. When I was an EIS officer he would invite me to his home for his Christmas parties; he called them "klags," out of the Swedish term, and at these parties was some very illustrious people, including the famous Ralph McGill, the publisher of the Atlanta Journal, who was a crusader for civil rights at that time, and other illustrious people. I felt very honored that Jim would invite me to his home. The second memory I have is when he came to my home. I was a fellow in infectious disease at Bellevue Hospital. He came to New York to lecture. I encountered him at the lecture, invited him to my small apartment, he said he would come in a little while. I went home and waited for him and he arrived with 12 other people. But he was thoughtful enough to have drinks and food that he'd purchased on the way.

[Jennifer McQuiston] He brought his own drinks to your party?

[Myron Schultz] Yes, he did. He was very gregarious—always very gregarious. And then these encounters went on down through the years. I hosted his 60<sup>th</sup>, his 65<sup>th</sup>, and his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday parties in my home. Lots of people and many of his friends went to Houston for his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday party, which was a 3-day bash. It was incredible how much good feeling and good cheer there was for Jim and true affection. So my life was enriched by him.

[Casey Barton Behravesh] Every year, the CDC gives out the James H. Steele Veterinary Public Health Award, honoring a recent or current EIS officer who made important contributions to the field of veterinary public health. During his lifetime, Dr. Steele really enjoyed following the accomplishments of not only of the winners, but also all of the nominees. In your mind, why is this type of award, rather than an award for more senior scientists, something that best honors Dr. Steele's legacy?

[Myron Schultz] Well, one of the unique features of Dr. Steele was that he loved mentoring young people. Both of you were subjects of his mentoring. So was I. Even the Surgeon General Carmona was a mentee of Jim when he first came into office, but it was mainly younger people that he took under his wings and this award is for people who are rising stars in their beginning careers. So it typifies so well how Jim dealt with people. Awards for senior folks are given by institutions or foundations but this is quite a different type of award and represents Jim's feelings so well.

[Casey Barton Behravesh] I had the pleasure of being the recent person who got to call Dr. Steele with updates on CDC's annual Steele Award and he was always ecstatic to hear about the bright young EIS officers that would carry on his legacy. But I also remember how I needed to plan for the call for a time when I had more than a few minutes to spare on the phone!

[Myron Schultz] Yeah. Jim Steele's telephone calls were legendary. He did this with everyone in his life. Not just you, not just me, but everyone. And I would have telephone calls with him that would last for an hour or more but they are rich because Jim was interested not only in veterinary public health but in current events, in history, in literature and music, and he was very well read and he was unique for his memory. He had extraordinary memory. And in addition to that, I was at CDC for about 7 or 8 years while he was there so we had many friendships in common and he

would love to reminisce about it. So Jim was unique in the telephone calls that he made with his friends.

[Casey Barton Behravesh] Dr. Steele took special pleasure in mentoring young students of all professions and encouraging them to really think about public health, as well as issuing them challenges for their careers. He spent countless hours mentoring me during my studies and my early career. In what ways do you think Dr. Steele should be considered a role model for new public health scientists?

[Myron Schultz] Yes, they should follow in his path in the realm of mentoring. It's not done often enough or with as much care as Jim did with his mentees. He loved mentoring and it was so important to the younger folks to have someone to guide them and direct them, that he's truly a model for other people. Yes.

[Jennifer McQuiston] Why is it important to not only acknowledge the contributions that Dr. Steele made to public health, but remember them as we go forward, or as Dr. Steele would say "carry on"?

[Myron Schultz] Yeah, that was his favorite expression. Isaac Newton said that we stand on the shoulders of giants and we should stand on the shoulders of Jim Steele and carry on his work. What he did was enormous. We've spoken up until now about his personal attributes but his professional contributions were enormous. He established a discipline of veterinary public health and he established, he was one of the two fathers of the One Health Initiative, the other one being Calvin Schwabe, and he had the unique capacity to take developments in the scientific realm and transmute them into programs that were real preventive health programs—things like his programs on rabies control, his psitticosis control program, his crusading for irradiation of foods, and in their totality, his work has saved the lives of millions of people, so we really should honor him and remember him down through time, yes.

[Jennifer McQuiston] Thank you so much for joining us today, Dr. Schultz.

We've been talking with Dr. Myron Schultz about his In Memoriam: James Harlan Steel (1913--2013), which appears in the March 2014 issue of CDC's journal, *Emerging Infectious Diseases*. This article is also available at [cdc.gov/eid](http://cdc.gov/eid).

If you'd like to comment on this podcast, send an email to [eideditor@cdc.gov](mailto:eideditor@cdc.gov). We're Jennifer McQuiston and Casey Barton Behravesh for *Emerging Infectious Diseases*.

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