

Shepard Award Winners, Part 1: Dr. Stephen Thacker

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC — safer, healthier people.

[Dr. Gaynes] Welcome to MMWR's look at the scientists inside CDC. I'm your host, Dr. Robert Gaynes.

This is another in a short series of interviews with recipients of the prestigious Charles C. Shepard Award, which is presented annually to a CDC scientist in recognition of his or her work, the impact of that work on public health, their professional leadership, and recognition by peers. We are privileged to be speaking with this year's winner of the Shepard Lifetime Achievement Award, Dr. Stephen Thacker.

Dr. Thacker is the director of CDC's Office of Workforce and Career Development. He is also an adjunct professor at Emory University's School of Public Health. Dr. Thacker holds an MD from Mt. Sinai School of Medicine and a Bachelor's in Biology and Chemistry from Princeton University. Congratulations and welcome to the show, Steve.

[Dr. Thacker] Thanks, Bob; delighted to be here.

[Dr. Gaynes] Steve, among your numerous awards and honors, how high does the Charles C. Shepard Award rank?

[Dr. Thacker] The Shepard Award is one of the two highest ranking awards at CDC, and I feel honored and even a bit taken a back to have received this award.

[Dr. Gaynes] How long have you been with CDC?

[Dr. Thacker] I came to CDC in 1976.

[Dr. Gaynes] How did you come to work at CDC?

[Dr. Thacker] As a medical student, the chairman of the Department of Community Medicine told me about the Epidemic Intelligence Service, the EIS, and suggested I apply, and that's how I came to CDC.

[Dr. Gaynes] So tell us a little bit about your career since then?

[Dr. Thacker] I was an EIS Officer assigned to the Washington, DC Health Department. I was brought in, in the middle of my second year as an EIS Officer, to begin a unit in what was then the Bureau of Epidemiology, to coordinate surveillance activities at CDC. Being an epidemiologist, I've had the privilege of working in a number of areas, including epidemiology, environmental health, injury control, and now the Office of Workforce and Career Development.

[Dr. Gaynes] Looking back Steve, what events stand out as you look at your long career at CDC?

[Dr. Thacker] That's a very tough question, Bob. My first day on the job as an EIS Officer I was sent out to investigate an epidemic in Pennsylvania which turned out to be the Legionnaires' disease epidemic, the largest investigation to that date that had been conducted by CDC. Since then, I've been privileged to work with a number of top notch scientists, program managers, domestically and internationally, so it's really hard to pinpoint any particular thing over another.

[Dr. Gaynes] You were director of CDC's Epidemiology Program Office for 15 years, an office that includes the Epidemic Intelligence Service or EIS program. Talk a little bit about the development and growth of the EIS program.

[Dr. Thacker] The EIS Program was established in 1951 by CDC's first Chief Epidemiologist, Alex Langmuir. It was done in response to a concern about biological warfare during the Korean Conflict. Alex's desire was to place practicing epidemiologists in the field, both domestically and ultimately internationally. Since that time, over 3,000 officers have graduated. Several have become Directors of CDC, Assistant Secretaries of Health, and just for an example, for the last 25 years, 40 percent of all the state epidemiologists have been EIS grads.

[Dr. Gaynes] Steve, what's your proudest or most satisfying accomplishment?

[Dr. Thacker] This is a difficult question too, Bob, because there's been so many things I've been pleased about, and I would say every time I see a CDC person accomplish something, whether it's here in Atlanta, in the field, internationally, on television, or at national meetings, I feel very proud about working at this agency and contributing to its mission.

[Dr. Gaynes] Steve, can you give us some insight into your current work?

[Dr. Thacker] The Office of Workforce and Career Development has been created out of really no precedent, and what we've tried to do is, not only develop the fellowship programs, like EIS and the nine other fellowships that we conduct, but also enhance the ability of CDC workers, and public health workers in the field to do their jobs more effectively. What I've tried to bring to this is a look at a scientific approach to workforce development, and we developed a research unit to do that which has not been done here or really elsewhere in the country.

[Dr. Gaynes] What are your future goals?

[Dr. Thacker] Well, my future goal is getting to the next day like everybody else, but I want to continue to contribute to CDC and to the public health system here and around the world.

[Dr. Gaynes] Steve, thanks for taking time to talk with us, and congratulations again on your great honor.

[Dr. Thacker] Thanks so much, Bob.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.