

Peter Orris, MD, MPH Acceptance of Lifetime Achievement Award
World Federation of Public Health Associations
April 5, 2017 – Melbourne Australia

It is a true pleasure for me to be here today as the first time I came to Australia was in 1983 invited by the Government on demand of the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia to testify before a Royal Commission about the health effects of Dioxin and Agent Orange. It was a very exiting trip as I had recently become fascinated with the culture of Aboriginal Australians including stories of dreamtime, and song lines. Unfortunately despite my efforts, I found Aboriginal peoples almost invisible. Though clearly there is more to do but returning on this occasion to find every speaker acknowledging the aboriginal ownership of the land and the debt to their ancestors is a wonderful marking of the passage of 34 years.

Thank you for this honor and down payment on future activity. I am particularly happy for this recognition of my work in environmental public health to have occurred at such an important time of opportunity and threat with respect to climate change reflecting both our major victories and challenges. The recognition by this unique organization coordinating and leading the world's public health movement is a tribute to the work of many of you, and sister organizations such as Greenpeace, IPEN, GAIA, and Health Care Without Harm, both in changing minds within the world's community of peoples, and within our public health community as well, as to the centrality of the environment and climate change to our public health mission.

It is particularly gratifying to receive this award from you - activists and thinkers of this public health movement that recognizes the broadest definition of the public's health and holds firm to the vision of a better tomorrow with the threats of war, disease, and economic, racial, religious, sexual, and ethnic discrimination wiped away. You are visionaries and people's leaders from every land with an amazing unity of purpose against all odds. You are sober planners and realists who realize that the only way forward for us is to convince human beings on our quite small planet that it is only through assuring a better healthier life for us all, that we can assure it for ourselves and our families.

In an era in my country when the truth itself is under attack as never before, you hold fast to the fact basis of our plans and visions and the use of the extraordinary and growing science of epidemiology to help us understand and explain the reality around us.

The intersection of these two often divergent demands on us, first the need to convince the public, and perforce their representatives no matter how imperfect they may be, and second our fidelity to the truth, creates much of the drama of our lives and the constant searching for new methods and strategies.

This brings us to our precious Public Health Associations. They give voice not only to the voiceless in society as a whole in their advocacy for a healthy future, but to our colleagues on the front lines in government, often unable to speaking clearly and provocatively to the public, who prod and cajole policy makers but never too far out front lest they lose all capacity to move society a head as far as it is willing to go today – knowing we will move it further tomorrow. The public health association's independent civil society voice is crucial to our moving forward and I am so proud to be honored by you holding this flame today.

So thank you Beloved Comrades as our South African Mentors in the anti-apartheid struggle would say or compañeros as our Cuba compatriots affirmed as they spread their doctors and concepts of public health globally, for this down payment on future action and I hope my next 70 years will justify your faith in me. (perhaps not so fact based but aspirational)

And finally one personal note of thanks to my wife and partner, Dr. Sita Rao, who, at some risk to her financial wellbeing and perhaps physical as well, has allowed me to pursue this calling which began as a high school student whose face can be seen in the crowd listening to Dr. King's "I have a dream" speech from behind the podium in 1963 to this podium in 2017. You have covered for me, taught me, comforted me, criticized me in so many critical ways that I shall forever be in love and in your debt.