

*REMARKS UPON RECEIVING THE 2006 DAVID P. RALL AWARD  
FOR ADVOCACY IN PUBLIC HEALTH*

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I am proud to come from a public health family, and to be a member of APHA, and I thank the Association for this award. Other than my family, the three things that give my life meaning are hiking, singing and conducting choral music, and science-based advocacy – and so now I'm torn between interpreting this award as a license to do more of the first two or as a signal to take my work even more seriously.

Just to be mentioned in the same breath as David Rall makes me especially proud. As Ellen Silbergeld wrote, David “was truly the intellectual and ethical founder of modern environmental medicine, and of research that firmly established environmental issues as integral to public health.” Many of you knew David better than I did, but I have some unique memories of how generously he took me under his wing at several times when I first came to D.C. after graduate school in the mid-1980s. I also look up to the previous winners of this award with tremendous admiration. I know a bit about the excellent work of Professor Nestle and Professor Baquet, but I especially revere the work of the recipients from the occupational/environmental health field – Eula Bingham, David Michaels, James Huff, and Phil Landrigan.

I want to thank my new colleagues at the UMDNJ School of Public Health – Dean Audrey Gotsch, Associate Dean George Rhoads, and department chairs Mark

Robson and Jim Zhang – and equally those at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University (Dean Anne-Marie Slaughter, Professor Michael Oppenheimer, and the late David Bradford) – for hiring me back into academia despite an 11-year hiatus in government. There are too many people in academia who've helped me over the years for me to thank, but I do want to recognize a few mentors whose personal and professional influence extends back the furthest, notably John Evans (my dissertation advisor), Dale Hattis, Kristin Shrader-Frechette, John Bailar, Nick Ashford, Lauren Zeise, and Baruch Fischhoff. I've also learned a great deal from several experts whose views I often find troubling, but who have always treated me personally with integrity and kindness, in particular John Graham and Dennis Paustenbach. I owe a particular debt to Jeff Ruch at Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, and to David Langfitt at Montgomery McCracken, for representing me so expertly in my whistleblower dispute with OSHA.

On that subject, it seems that none of the papers I've written or regulations I developed has received as much attention as my advocacy of OSHA providing its own inspectors with medical testing for chronic beryllium disease—the cause that cost me my executive position at OSHA, that cost the taxpayers a chunk of money to resolve my lawsuit for retaliation, and that cost OSHA some of its remaining credibility as an agency that cares about any worker's health or that can be trusted to enforce 14 of the nation's whistleblower protection statutes. I wish I could say I was clever enough to have engineered a dispute that resulted in a reversal of the decision not to offer testing, and in a personal and professional vindication, but that's not the

way it happened. I simply saw a policy – and later a cover-up – bereft of scientific, ethical, and even public-relations merit, and spoke out about it.

I'm particularly grateful to APHA to be recognized for “science advocacy,” because so many influential people are confused enough (or devious enough) to claim that science and advocacy are incompatible. I have always believed that public health, environmental protection, and the like are arenas where scientific (and economic) uncertainty compels each of us, like it or not, to be advocates for *something*. The way we admit or hide uncertainty, and the way we respond to it, answers the age-old question of “which side are you on?” To pretend otherwise is *not* to be “objective”; it is to be an advocate for the *status quo* or for a “best estimate” that treats the prospect of needless human suffering and the prospect of nonessential expenditures on controls as mathematically and morally equivalent, which of course they are not. Sometimes inaction is preferable to action—but that conclusion too is every bit an advocacy position.

I think my science advocacy career—so far—has been simple and consistent; I've really only sounded two notes. First, that both cost-benefit analysis and precaution are necessary. The so-called experts who have hijacked risk assessment and tried to use it to trivialize risks, exaggerate costs, and condescend to the public have been forging a sword out of a plowshare. But mistaken as well are the advocates of a “pure precautionary principle” divorced from any use of science to help gauge what really causes harm, in what amounts, and with what new consequences if it is eliminated. I know of no clearer warning about the folly of precaution for precaution's sake than

the fact that we are now mired in Iraq because of the failure to temper precaution about WMDs with any sort of analysis of the true risks thereof and the tragic consequences of action. Secondly, I have advocated for workers, who simply bear too much risk for the rest of us. In this regard, while the current OSHA leadership—befitting the Administration they serve—is obviously impervious to science, I most regret that I was not a better advocate during the last couple of years of the previous Administration. In some file drawer at OSHA sits a final tuberculosis standard, a proposed chromium rule fully 10 times more stringent than the one OSHA finalized in 2006, a framework for an ergonomics standard rather different than the one struck down by Congress in 2001, risk assessments for 8 of the toxic substances in need of a new PEL, an analysis of the proper Assigned Protection Factor (that would be 5, not 10...) for filtering-facepiece respirators, and on and on—all casualties of the so-called “good guys” and *their* disdain for science.

At the risk of revealing the depths of my naïveté, however, I can simplify a career in science advocacy even further—I am drawn to try and take the least circuitous path to the truth. So far, it has been easy, in that my tendency towards precautionary analysis and my concern for workers have never come into conflict with what I see as true. The hard part has been working among and for individuals who treat the truth like it was the newest electronic gadget to be manipulated. I really believe that the casual lies beget the “big lies”—brought to you by “Mission Accomplished” banners and backed up by withholding of information, misuse of data, and the glorious tendency to write the press release first and then look for something, anything, to

support it. If the agencies ever want to get back to their original regulatory and enforcement missions again, they had better staff them back up with people who indeed will advocate—but for something larger than their own career paths.

Finally, I want to thank my family. My father Max has cheerfully (or so it has seemed to me) supported everything I've ever accomplished (and many things I've failed at as well). My Uncle Lou, who will be 95 in March, got his MPH at Johns Hopkins after World War II, and helped inspire me to choose public health and policy as a career. My wonderful wife Joanne has had to move her psychology practice from D.C. to Boulder to D.C. to Princeton during the past six years, and never blamed me despite this needless price of my advocacy. Most of all, I honor the hereditary gifts and life lessons I've received from my mother Mae, a retired ophthalmic nurse, who showed me how, and tried to show me when, to try to be the irresistible force or the immovable object. I often tell my daughter Maia that it's a cruel fate of genetics to be both the second most stubborn person in the world and also in our little household, but I look forward (as I think you all should) to being on the same side of whatever causes she chooses to advocate for in the decades ahead. As Tennyson said, may those of us just starting out, and those of us "made weak by time and fate," remain "strong in will/ To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."