

A Legacy of Leadership

John C. Villforth

John C. Villforth attended Pennsylvania State University, where he received B.S. and M.S. degrees in sanitary engineering in 1952 and 1954, respectively. Immediately upon graduation, he was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force, Medical Service Corps.

He served as the sanitary and industrial hygiene engineer at Loring Air Force Base in Maine. In 1956, he was assigned to the Atomic Energy Commission fellowship program at Vanderbilt University and Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

Upon completion of his graduate training and receipt of his M.S. in physics, Mr. Villforth was assigned to the Office of the Surgeon Headquarters, Air Force Logistics Command at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio. He served as Secretary of the USAF Radioisotopes Committee, which was the Air Force contact with the Atomic Energy Commission on matters relating to licensing and use of radioisotopes.

In May 1961, Mr. Villforth entered on duty with the commissioned corps of the U.S. Public Health Service and was assigned to the radiological health facility of the then-Division of Radiological Health at Rockville, Maryland, with the responsibility for the Radiation Surveillance Network (RSN). The RSN was invaluable in alerting the states of increased levels of fallout during the resumption of weapons testing.

In January 1963, Mr. Villforth was assigned as Chief, Radioactive Materials Section, Division of Radiological Health. Mr. Villforth, through the efforts of this Section and in cooperation with the AEC, encouraged the State health agencies to develop a control program for radium and other non-AEC licensed materials, emphasizing the need to control the use, or more appropriately, misuse of radium. One very valuable program for radium control implemented by Mr. Villforth was the



convenient disposal of obsolete and damaged sources.

Following the reorganization of the Public Health Service, Mr. Villforth was appointed Chief of the Medical and Occupational Radiation Program. In addition to the continuation of the radioactive materials activities, the Program, under Mr. Villforth's guidance, developed recommendations for the safe operation of particle accelerators; initiated the only nationwide survey of the use of radionuclides in medicine; and produced a survey manual for dental and medical x-ray equipment.

Congress in the late 1960's enacted landmark legislation—the Radiation Control for Health and Safety Act—authorizing

the federal government to set and enforce safety controls for medical, consumer and industrial electronic products that emit various forms of radiation. Shortly afterwards, Mr. Villforth was promoted to the PHS rank of Director (equivalent to Navy Captain) and named Director of the Bureau of Radiological Health, the PHS (and later FDA) component responsible for implementing the new law. In a relatively short time, Mr. Villforth built a national program from the ground up and did so despite the loss of a substantial portion of the cadre of PHS radiological health experts who were reassigned to the newly-created Environmental Protection Agency.

He successfully put into force an interdisciplinary, science-based program that effectively balanced product regulation with training and other voluntary initiatives to reduce population exposure to ionizing and non-ionizing radiation. He did so at a time when, in FDA, reliance on non-regulatory means, such as cooperative programs with states, health provider organizations and consumers to achieve a public health result, was a somewhat novel philosophical approach.

By some estimates, Mr. Villforth's radiological health bureau reduced the number of unnecessary medical x-ray procedures performed in the U.S. by as much as one-third, resulting in appreciable savings in patient and health insurance costs, as well as radiation exposure. Separate quality assurance programs conducted under his supervision and in conjunction with state radiation agencies achieved substantial reductions in patient exposures from mammography and dental x-ray procedures.

Also under his tutelage, educational materials were produced that were widely adopted by the medical education community and became an integral part of medical residency programs. Taken together, these initiatives dramatically lowered patient radiation exposure.

In 1979, when America experienced the worst accident in the history of commercial nuclear power generation at Three Mile Island, then-HEW Secretary Joseph Califano designated Mr. Villforth as "point man" for all of the Department's radiation emergency response activities. Throughout the crisis, Mr. Villforth demonstrated decisive, competent leadership that enabled national leaders, within and outside government—including President Carter—to make well-informed crisis management decisions and to offer residents in the vicinity of the TMI nuclear plant clear, understandable and reassuring guidance on their personal safety.

In 1982, the FDA Commissioner and Secretary of Health and Human Services recruited Mr. Villforth to take the helm of FDA's medical devices regulatory program. Within a few short years, significant progress was made in fulfilling the prescriptive requirements of the law. Under his direction, the Center made major gains in completing a myriad of regulations required by the 1976 medical device law. As a result, Mr. Villforth restored Congressional and public confidence in FDA's medical device regulatory process.

One very successful program initiated by Mr. Villforth was the development of a commercial-grade television studio that produced videotapes on fast-breaking and important regulatory issues for distribution upon request to interested parties in the U.S. and around the world.

In time, the studio's reputation for high quality programming became so renowned that other components of FDA and HHS, as well as agencies elsewhere in the U.S., began using this studio. With this videotape technology, Mr. Villforth created the National Radiological Health Network, which entailed the provision of videotape players and monitors to every state radiation control agency in the U.S., enabling the Center to provide state inspectors with monthly training and educational programs. He expanded the studio's capability to use satellite technology to broadcast live video teleconferences to sites around the country and to foreign audiences.

Throughout his distinguished career, Mr. Villforth has shown exemplary leadership and a tireless dedication to public health. His forward-looking and remarkably personable management style has endeared him to subordinates and peers alike. His integrity and stature, along with his extraordinary ability to see the big picture and to motivate others to work toward a common goal, personifies the very best in a national public health leader.

He has received numerous awards, including: Elda E. Andersen Award (a highly prestigious award in the field of health physics), Regular Corps Ribbon - 1963, Surgeon General's Exemplary Service Medal - 1974, Meritorious Service Medal - 1980, Foreign Duty Award - 1983, Special Assignment Award - 1983, Distinguished Service Medal - 1980 and 1984, Outstanding Commendation Medal - 1986, National Emergency Preparedness Award - 1989, Unit Commendation - 1989 and 1990, Commendation Medal - 1990, FDA Distinguished Alumni Award - 2000.

Following his retirement from government service in 1981, Mr. Villforth became president of the Food and Drug Law (FDLI) Institute, a non-profit educational organization dedicated to advancing the public health by providing a neutral forum for critical examination of laws, regulations and policies related to human and animal pharmaceuticals, medical devices, radiological products, other health care technologies and foods. He retired from the FDLI in 2001 but continues to stay involved with national radiation issues.