

# A damp, but promising, beginning

by Mark Oberle, Founder & Director 1990-1991



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Below, handout from NWCPHP's first Summer Institute. At bottom, UW's Health Sciences Center sign, courtesy Dean's office, UW School of Public Health.

When Gil Omenn was Dean of the University of Washington (UW) School of Public Health (SPH), one of his three goals was to improve academia's interaction with public health practice. In 1987 this was especially important because the Institute of Medicine was about to release its report, "The Future of Public Health," which documented the many challenges of public health practice in a deteriorating resource environment. Gil took advantage of a federal personnel assignment called the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) liaison officer program for schools of public health, to request a Public Health Service Commissioned

Officer to UW. Interestingly, the CDC home of that program was the Training and Laboratory Program Office, then headed by Paul Wiesner, who now hosts NWCPHP's popular Hot Topics series (page 8).

In December 1987, I started my assignment at UW as a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Epidemiology, and later as Assistant Dean for Public Health Practice. On June 5, 1989, an energetic Masters of Public Health student, Natalia Kanem, and I organized a workshop at UW to discuss possible steps that the UW SPH could take to improve the School's interaction with the practice community. We had proposed an intimate focus group, but demand was so great that it turned into a workshop with 92 practitioners.

Fortunately just after that workshop, the Health Resources and Services Administration issued its own special projects request for proposal to address public health practice and academia. Jim Gale, Joanne Hoover, Chuck Treser, Geoff Hoare and other faculty members worked over Christmas vacation to pull together a proposal for NWCPHP.

On July 1, 1990, NWCPHP began operations under the Department of Health Services with our three-year, \$511,000 cooperative agreement budget. We were housed in a leaky, E-Wing basement room, with one talented staff person, Martha Thomas. In our first year, Chuck Treser coordinated a training needs assessment in the region, with 1,082 responses. That survey revealed tremendous needs for basic public health training, which partially reflected severe federal budget cuts from the 1980s.

The first year saw short course offerings in Washington, Oregon, and Montana, plus work in practicum development, faculty/agency exchanges, and a new project working with local boards of health. We then offered our first Summer Institute for Public Health Practice July 22-August 2, 1991. Thirty-four public health practitioners attended the first Summer Institute, ably directed by Joanne Hoover. At that time faculty were quite concerned that two weeks was not enough time to build skills for practitioners. We have since yielded to the time pressures of busy agencies and reduced the Summer Institute from two weeks to one.

After I had spent a year setting up NWCPHP as well as running the UW Preventive Medicine Residency, CDC reassigned me to the new Washington State Department of Health, where I was still able to teach at the Summer Institute and other NWCPHP courses. Jesse Tapp took over as director in 1991.



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