Dennis Olsen

This is an interview with Dennis Olsen on July 11th, two thousand eight at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia about his role in the smallpox eradication campaign, interviewed by The Melissa McSwegin With this interview we're hoping to capture for future generations the memories of participants and their families involved in eradicating small pox. This is an incredibly important and historic achievement and we want to hear about your experience. I have some questions to guide you but please feel free to recount any special stories or anecdotes that you remember about events or people. The legal agreement you signed says that you are donating the oral history to the U.S. Federal government and it will be in the public domain.

Now, for the record could you please state your name and that you know you are being recorded.

Olsen: My name is Dennis G. Olsen and I know that I'm being recorded.

McSwegin: Okay, great. Thank you. So to start out with could briefly describe your childhood, your college education and how that led into you working in public health?

Olsen: Well, I grew up in Bend Oregon and all of my pre-college schooling there. Went off to the University of Oregon then for my college work and I can honestly say that none of that prepared me for a role in public health. My first inclination to be involved in public health was through the University of Oregon placement service where I met a CDC colleague E. J. Spike and I was recruited at the CDC and spent thirty two years with the organization.

McSwegin: Okay. Well great. Well how did you then become involved with the smallpox eradication program?

Olsen: I was first recruited to come back to Atlanta out of my assignment in Los Angeles California to actually be involved with the early malaria eradication effort and as the politics of that were working their way through Washington and it was

determined that what the plans had been were not going to come fruition, I was contacted to ask if I wanted to go to West Africa for smallpox eradication. Agreed to do that, got married to my lovely wife and off we went to the country of Liberia and spent three years there. After returning from that we knew then eventually that the Indian program was going on and made overtures to be one of the people who went to India for a three month assignment. At the conclusion of that and the enjoyment of that work and the colleagues from around the world and the imminent success of the program I asked if I could go back for a longer term and was - we were accepted and returned for a two year stint and that time I was named the WHO, World Health Organization coordinator of the smallpox eradication effort in the state of Uttar Pradesh, a population of about one hundred and ten to one hundred and twenty million people.

My role was to assure that the program policies were being carried out, searches were being conducted, that the international staff and the Indian domestic staff that were working on the effort had the resources that they needed to carry out the function, to do spot assessments of the work at the primary health care centers and/or hospitals. Handle largely also to be the banker and make sure all the funds were flowing in the right direction. A very enjoyable experience and I met a lot of interesting people. Besides Uttar Pradesh my wife and I went to Bangladesh for a three to four week period of time to assist in one of the major searches and quite possibly look at an assignment in Bangladesh that they were - they need an administrator and I'm a public health advisor and not a physician. We decided that we're - we appreciated more the Indian aspects of that project and returned to Lucknow and carried out those functions for another, I'm guessing now - six to seven months and then we were reassigned into Delhi in the regional office in order to be the senior administrator for the program for its duration in India and participated with the international commission to declare India smallpox free. So, quite an interesting period of time for us and we really enjoyed the work.

McSwegin: Describe a little bit your relationship with your - with the host country counterparts in India and Bangladesh?

Olsen: On the first assignment, the three month assignment, we

were working directly with the - I was assigned to a city in Bihar state or a town called Bhagalpur along the Ganges and our immediate relationship was with the health officer of that town. And the people who had gone before of which there were at least two others possibly three, had developed a strong working relationship so my fitting into that was just a simple as it possibly could be. There was absolutely not difficulty at all. We could work and do what it was that was required, got support to the extent that it was available from the locals and of course a lot of support from Cyro in Delhi. So it was a very easy experience that way. And all of the people, staff for the most part at the primary health care centers had been heavily involved with the effort to eradicate smallpox and participated to the extent that their abilities allowed. There were those times when we had to do a little extra encouragement in some areas and so forth but we still had very strong support of the local health officer and the Indian government from Delhi. Those people made periodic visits to assure that these relationships were maintained and overcame any of the infrequent difficulties that approached.

When I became the WHO coordinator in Uttar Pradesh then I worked directly with the Minister of Health for that state and the staff at the other levels in order to carry out the functions. Again these things went very smoothly because of the overall direction of the Indian government from Delhi and the support that they provided to the program and those relationships never got in the way of carrying out the function. That is why I think the program was successful to a large degree.

McSwegin: What would you say would have been the biggest challenge while you were there?

Olsen: That's a hard question. There were - the challenges of first of all motivating the population to report rash like illness. So many other things were impacting on the population. Of course we instituted a reward system, a financial reward system to help with that. The difficulties of just getting around in the country. Not all areas had a road network been established. Quite often those that were established were interrupted for flow of water to farm. Quite often where we had to go roads had never been established so just getting to investigate an outbreak, getting to it was difficult. Getting

supplies sometime the area were difficult. Heat, surviving in certain areas was difficult but all of those things could be overcome. It just took a little bit longer to do things than one might have hoped for.

McSwegin: And what do you think - you've talked a little bit about the relationships that you've had and other things that helped it to be very successful but what do you think were the greatest successes that you had during that time?

Olsen: Well the great success was that smallpox eradicated and I think that also a success to show that through a combined effort and the cooperation you could - excuse me - tackle a difficult situation and have some success from it and therefore the encouragement to continue with whatever effort you were in. Quite often we were approached out in the hinterland if you will about doing something for other sets of problems that existed in the country. Something to do with water, something to do with sanitation, to go beyond our scope of work in smallpox eradication to add some assistance or input into these levels. And of course we would report these sorts of requests back through the system but I think our experience and our being on site and the success of the program probably led, I think there is evidence that it did lead to attention being paid to these sorts of circumstances and problems as well and having them attacked when resources and political support were provided.

McSwegin: How did your family adapt to living abroad both in Africa or in India?

Olsen: Well, my wife were together. We don't have children. We're still married so. My wife Carolyn actually was quite involved in the Indian program. Some of the things that I would make recommendations to the central offices in Delhi with technical graphs and so forth that had to do with demonstrating how you could show your project was moving in a certain direction or had these successes or these failures, Carolyn being an engineer and having these kinds of talents put these together. So - and she went with me on the searches out into the field and through her own oral history she'll tell you some very interesting stories from her side but I probably would not have made the full two years if she hadn't have been there.

McSwegin: So, what was it like living in India beyond the working environment, just living in India and participating in the culture?

Olsen: Well, I can tell you from my - I had already been to Africa with that program and so when I thought, not thought but had been accepted to go to India the African situation would prepare me and it was largely true. But I do remember getting off the plane in New Delhi and the heat and the just large numbers of people and the immediate difference with - just an overwhelming humanity kind of thing, I thought what in the world have I gotten myself into. And we had a few days of training in Delhi then we were set out into the field to be with colleagues that had already been in the country two to three months to gain some experience. And I met a good friend Ras Charter in Bareilly who showed me how to get the jeep stuck as soon as you could but did demonstrate how work was done in the field. And then I went off to my assignment and met another CDC person waiting for me in Bhagalpur, Dr. David Hayman who had been there for a couple of months and he was kind of a light yellow. He had hepatitis so I thought well if he can put up with that I can put up with whatever is here. But I - Bhagalpur was a small place in comparison to the capital of Bihar, Patna. Patna was a small place compared to Delhi and I guess the point of this story is when I got back to Delhi after three months it looked like a large European city that I can definitely survive in.

That's when - with that successful three months I asked Dr. Henderson - D. A. Henderson - and Dr. Bill Fergie if it would be possible to come back to India for a longer period. And after that longer period both my wife and I asked again if there was some way to stay with an active program be it immunization, diarrheal disease control, malaria, whatever it is that we might do to remain in India because we enjoyed the experience so much. We met a lot of interesting people. The Das family Lucknow. We lived above their residence. The people that we rented from in New Delhi, people in the field, it was just a pleasurable two years.

McSwegin: Have you maintained any of your relationships with people you met in India probably?

Olsen: You know thirty years have passed and I'm not sure how

many people are - but the answer to that, short answer to that is not from the Indian side although I understand I will be seeing - we will be seeing a Dr. Dada who was a senior person in the Ministry of Health. He's in town and I look forward to renewing that relationship. We have shared with our CDC colleagues and others over the years when reliving these experiences, honing our lives and things like that.

McSwegin: What would you say are your most memorable moments from working with the smallpox campaign?

Olsen: Oh my goodness. One was going out to the very first smallpox investigation in Bhagalpur with Dr. Hayman. We had to walk through the rice paddies and wade through a river and my shoes were not appropriate. I lost the nails off both big toes, had full foot blisters underneath the - on my bottoms of my feet. Had to have tea and sugar and salts to get the electrolytes up and rode out on a donkey. It was - thanks to Dr. Hayman. Other experiences, I have to take some time to reflect. The international commission we happened to be there at the end of our assignment when they actually the commission came and announced that smallpox was eradicated from India. That was so satisfying to have spent the time and then to actually be there at a moment when history had been made. That will certainly be hard to - I will never forget it. And the others I think were just the individual relationships we made with people. The staff in Lucknow from the secretary to the very important and very good friend paramedical assistant Rujinder Singh. It's just things like that that stick with you and if it ever could happen again would not hesitate at all to do it again.

McSwegin: And how would you say working with this campaign has affected your life and career since then?

Olsen: Well I don't have a career anymore. I retired in nineteen ninety four. Affected our lives is that we're extremely proud that we had the opportunity to do it. I like to think that we did it well and enjoy the relationships that we still have with people that went over and did these sorts of things and days like today when we're back to remember what we all went through. It wasn't always easy. I don't ever want to let people think that it was just all good times and success. We lived in very

harsh conditions a lot of the time and we put ourselves in jeopardy many times but just the pride of having done it, the pride of success and listening just this morning to what's happening with global programs. We like to think that maybe we were in a small way part of what allowed these things that now happening to move forward and hopefully enjoy some of the success that we had. We did the pioneer work they live to say.

McSwegin: At what point during the program while you were working on it, at what point did you know that smallpox would be eradicated?

Olsen: The day they announced it.

McSwegin: So you weren't convinced until then?

Olsen: Well you know you always wait for the next person to come forward and say we have a report of rash like illness. And you might have gone for six or seven months or a year and think you know this is pretty much it, we're sort of wrapping so it can happen. When I left Liberia in the African program we were sure for a whole year that we had not smallpox, quite successful and then someone came down from upcountry and said we have a woman and child in the hospital with rash like illness that looks like smallpox. So, when I - my wife and I were just ready to leave the country. Our assignment was over and my replacement had arrived so the same thing could have happened in India. As it turned out the African issue was monkey pox not smallpox but once they made the announcement in India we had assurances after many, many searches that there was no illness, no smallpox. Of course the search went on for anther couple of years to continue to assure that. It really didn't end at that point. It was the point where we said that we had reached that particular part of the goal but we had to confirm it again.

McSwegin: What were the important lessons that you learned from smallpox eradication that you then applied to other parts of your career afterwards?

Olsen: Well, the career after that was some domestic program work in childhood immunizations, then international work in HIV Aids and some work with international immunizations, diarrhea disease control and malaria control. For the international things what

was learned was how to deal in an international setting. What things had to be attended to, to allow the program to have some success in the relationships that you needed to develop with the host country. How important it was to assure that you had the proper logistics before you tried, got the plan established and the logistics to carry it out and the resources to carry it out. And the important, very important tools of assessment. Continuing to look to see where you were along the road to trying to achieve your objective. Not just assuming you were doing okay but actively making sure from tools to asses your program activities and a personal relationship skills were honed I think. How to make sure that you were for example whatever credit might be accruing that you made sure it was the local that got the recognition. We knew we were doing okay, we didn't need to be told. So those kinds of things. I think those are always helpful. They are the more mundane things about improving your writing skills and these sorts of things but I think I touched on the more important.

McSwegin: Now you have spoken a lot about the successes of the program. If you had been the one running the entire program worldwide is there anything that you would have done differently, that you would have changed about it?

Olsen: No, I don't think so. How can you fight with success? You know I never ever thought of myself having those kind of capabilities. When you work for someone like D.A. Henderson, Bill Fergie, those are the people that have those visions and skills and at that level it's just a happy occasion that we got to be able to be a part of it. I can't think of anything I would change.

McSwegin: Well do you have anything else that you would like to add about your experience?

Olsen: No, I think we've pretty much covered the territory.

McSwegin: All right. Well, thank you very you much for your time and I appreciate you sharing with us your experience in India.

Olsen: Thank you very much for doing this.