

FDA Centennial Commemoration Ceremony Remarks

by

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**Harvey W. Wiley Federal Building
College Park, Maryland**

Secretary Leavitt, Commissioner von Eschenbach, members of the FDA and HHS “family”, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. It is a special privilege for me to be here this afternoon, speaking on behalf of the hundreds of FDA alumni and employee members of the FDA Alumni Association.

When Dr. Harvey Wiley led the effort a century ago to bring foods and drugs under federal regulation, he could not possibly have envisioned that we who have spent our lives dedicated to fulfilling his mission would be standing here today to commemorate the success of his vision. We who have served at FDA feel honored to have had the opportunity to serve our great nation and our great agency.

Our alumni organization was founded four years ago to reflect the camaraderie and sense of mission that we felt. At its core, our association seeks to embrace the same public service ideals that have guided FDA’s important work for the past 100 years.

We are also honored to be a designated co-sponsor of this FDA centennial observance.

Much more importantly, we have learned how important it is to stay connected to FDA and its service-oriented culture. In the past four years, our alumni have teamed up with Agency experts on regulatory consultations in countries such as Jordan and Bahrain. With members spread across 40 states, we were able last year to answer FDA’s call for volunteers to fill in for field office personnel deployed to the Gulf region following Hurricane Katrina. We have also offered the expertise of our alumni members to assist FDA in areas relating to drug safety and emergency preparedness and response.

These projects enable us to give back to the Agency what we feel it gave to us. At the same time, we recognize that we can do more, and we are prepared to do so. Very likely, in fact, our role in the years ahead will take on even greater importance as a result of an aging federal workforce -- what some government administrators are calling a “retirement tsunami.”

Not only does FDA stand to lose a sizeable portion of its human resources capacity in the next few years, it may well face a major challenge in maintaining a skilled workforce.

The incoming generation of federal workers -- compared to the past -- is seen as having a much different attitude about career paths and longevity of service. They may not be interested, as many of us were, in career-long service with the agency, and FDA will need to find new ways to institutionalize the knowledge it gains.

So the collective expertise of our alumni members, coupled with their vast institutional knowledge -- which cannot be replaced in the short term, if ever -- are commodities whose value will only increase with time.

Finally, we are also concerned that FDA be able to attract the very best young "next crop" of scientists and public health professionals. This is always a very important challenge for FDA, since FDA IS its people. We would like to help the Agency in a concrete way here, and that is why, this year, we presented Temple University's School of Pharmacy with a living FDA Centennial Scholarship Fund whose proceeds will be awarded to budding graduate students who are being trained in the field of regulatory science. We are excited by this program and will work to extend it.

But we are drawn here today -- to this place, not just to contemplate the future. We're here to celebrate FDA's illustrious past and salute the thousands of dedicated men and women who have given prodigiously of their talents to make our nation and the world a better, safer place.

It was once written that "public health is about social systems and collective decision-making rather than being exclusively about the isolated activities of individual members of the public." For 100 years, FDA has faithfully served the interests of the people of our *entire* nation and resisted the narrow interests of a few.

What makes FDA a truly unique and special agency is the sense of mission, public duty and integrity in its decision-making that is shared at all levels of the organization. It's that shared set of values that has earned the agency world-wide recognition and made it one of the 20th century's leading forces of social activism and respected public health champions of our time.

But the 100-year journey hasn't always been easy. Over the years, FDA has had to cope with a ballooning mandate and leaner budgets. It's been compelled to keep pace with astonishing advances in science and technology. And it's had to guard against approving innovative products too quickly while avoiding undue delay in allowing their entry into commerce. All of these challenges have required the Agency to maintain a delicate balance -- an equilibrium if you will -- between the public interest and the entrepreneurial interests of business and changing cultural values.

These challenges have also required FDA employees -- from commissioners on down, to be mindful of the need to be reasonable in their exercise of regulatory authority so as not to infringe upon individual liberty or hinder our free enterprise system.

Today, with the unrelenting threats of global bioterrorism, the prospect of a catastrophic pandemic, the ongoing scourge of cancer and HIV, and the de-coding of the human genome which will unleash the discovery of new medicines and medical technologies, FDA finds itself -- as it always has -- front and center in the public health arena, facing even greater challenges.

In evaluating FDA's first 100 years, history and public health scholars will no doubt conclude that the agency -- while not perfect -- has consistently tried to do the right thing, and that at the end of the day, the public has benefited greatly from its actions.

Dr. Wiley would be enormously proud of the agency he pioneered and humbled by the commitment of everyone associated with it to honor his legacy by keeping the public interest as the highest priority.

And so once again, on behalf of the FDA Alumni Association and its members, I offer my heartiest congratulations to all of us, who have served and who continue to serve our nation so well.

Thank you for allowing our Association to be part of this memorable occasion.