A physician who served as U.S. surgeon general, served as a government public health official for decades and took an active role in the 2015 Ebola crisis has received the AMA’s top honor, the Distinguished Service Award.

Boris D. Lushniak, MD, MPH, was one of several physicians honored at the 2017 AMA Interim Meeting in Honolulu. Dr. Lushniak served as acting U.S. surgeon general from July 2013 to December 2014. He also played an active role in government service for almost 30 years.

As surgeon general, he participated in disaster responses in various parts of the world. He was also part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health team at New York’s ground zero and oversaw much of the federal government’s planning for bioterrorism defense after the Sept. 11 attacks.

And during the Ebola crisis in 2015, Dr. Lushniak traveled to Liberia to command the only U.S. government hospital treating Ebola patients. AMA Chair-Elect Jack Resneck Jr., MD, said it wasn’t in Dr. Lushniak’s “nature to command the operation from a desk in Washington.”

Instead, “he had to be out in the field donning protective gear with his team to help care for health care workers infected with Ebola in Africa,” Dr. Resneck said. “His willingness to accept personal risk and help suffering patients is an inspiring story of dedication, integrity and true leadership.”

A Magnolia State hero

The AMA presented other awards at the Interim Meeting. Robert Smith, MD, was the recipient of the Medal of Valor Award, which is given to an AMA member who demonstrates courage under extraordinary circumstances in non-wartime situations. Dr. Smith was honored for his efforts in fighting social injustice and providing health care to Mississippians during the civil rights era.
During that time, Dr. Smith played a pivotal role by providing consistent health care to those with little or no access and was a founder of the Medical Committee for Civil Rights and the Committee for Human Rights.

“In dangerous, volatile times in our country, Dr. Smith placed himself repeatedly in harm’s way and made it his mission to stand up for the health care rights of African Americans,” AMA President David O. Barbe, MD, MHA, said. “He is a man of compassion, courage and bravery, who routinely put the health and wellbeing of others ahead of his own by providing medical care to the poor, uninsured and underserved citizens of Mississippi.”

Dr. Smith founded and implemented the concept of federally funded community health centers. More than 10,000 Federally Qualified Health Centers now serve 30 million Americans, including several hundred thousand people in Mississippi.

Medical society executives honored

Christine Ignaszak-Nadolny, executive director of the Medical Society of the County of Erie in New York, received the AMA’s Medical Executive Lifetime Achievement Award. The honor is given to a medical association executive who has made substantial contributions to the goals and ideals of the medical profession.

Among other examples of her leadership, Ignaszak-Nadolny has played an integral role in addressing the opioid crisis in Erie County by building, circulating and finalizing acute pain-management guidelines and advisories to help physicians in the area.

Karen L. Hackett, former CEO of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (AAOS), was given the AMA’s Lifetime Achievement Award for the work she completed during her 14-year tenure at AAOS. Hackett oversaw the planning, construction and opening of the new Orthopaedic Headquarters and the Orthopaedic Learning Center.

Her work didn’t end there. Hackett helped develop a number of quality initiatives in clinical practice and appropriate use, among others. Hackett also enhanced member and external communications with award-winning, nationally recognized public-service campaigns while helping to create unity among orthopaedic specialties and industry stakeholders.

Read more news coverage of the 2017 AMA Interim Meeting.