

# Public health champions and immunotherapy pioneer honored by AMA

FEB 21, 2019

## Andis Robeznieks

Senior News Writer

---

The AMA presented its Dr. Nathan Davis Awards for Outstanding Government Service to a pioneer in cancer immunotherapy and public health champions who have been battling the opioid crisis on the federal, state and municipal levels. The awards are named after the AMA founder and were presented during the AMA National Advocacy Conference in Washington, D.C.

There were eight honorees in all, and the award for outstanding member of the executive branch in career public service was given to Steven Rosenberg, MD, chief of the surgery branch at the National Cancer Institute for 44 years. Dr. Rosenberg was honored for advancing the use of immunotherapy, which targets the mutations present in patients' solid cancers.

"He has trained and inspired a generation of researchers and clinicians to continue and build on his pioneering work," said AMA Board Chair Jack Resneck Jr., MD.

Among those inspired by Dr. Rosenberg is oncologist and AMA President Barbara L. McAneny, MD, who tweeted: "Yes I had the pleasure of meeting one of my heroes who pioneered immunotherapy long before anyone thought these remarkable advances were anything but a pipe dream."

Sen. Lamar Alexander, R, Tenn., was recognized for his work spearheading bipartisan legislation such as the 21st Century Cures Act and the Substance Use-disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment (SUPPORT) for Patients and Communities Act.

After accepting his award, Alexander noted that during a recent Senate hearing addressing pain treatment, he spoke about how people are getting hurt by the "zeal" to impose limits on opioid prescribing and how treatment decisions should be left to physicians and patients.

He also recalled the bipartisan effort that led to passage of the Cures Act, and said "It is possible to get things done."

“Get stuff done” has been the motto adopted by Charlie Baker. The Republican governor of Massachusetts and former CEO of Harvard Pilgrim Health Care was honored for his work in addressing the opioid crisis.

Baker gave a heartfelt talk about how he couldn’t go anywhere in Massachusetts without someone wanting to discuss with him how opioids have affected someone in their family, and how they all said the same thing: “It’s been hell.”

Baker gave credit to physicians for the progress that has been made, including a 4 percent drop in Massachusetts opioid-overdose deaths in 2017. But he added that it will take as long to fix the problem as it did to create it, and he urged attendees to continue their efforts to combat what he called “a relentless, brutal and unforgiving challenge.”

A similar story was told by the recipient of the award for outstanding service at the municipal level, Eric J. Guenther, chief of police for Mundelein, Illinois, a far northern suburb of Chicago. Guenther led the creation of a program called “A Way Out,” which placed people in treatment programs as an alternative to arrest and prosecution.

Now people can come to the police department to get the help they need for a substance-use disorder, Guenther said, adding that 600 have done since June of 2016.

Previously, it was the last place people would go, but he noted that, at 2 a.m., about the only places open are the emergency department and the police department.

Other Nathan Davis recipients included Ellen M. Provost, DO, who has dedicated her career to building healthier rural Alaska communities and improving outcomes for the Alaska Native population; and Richard Izquierdo, MD, who founded the Urban Health Plan in New York City that provides care to 87,000 residents of the South Bronx community.

Ervin Stone Yen, MD, was recognized as the outstanding state legislator. As an Oklahoma state senator, Dr. Yen sponsored bills to make it illegal to text and drive, to ban children from using commercial tanning beds, and to raise awareness of sudden cardiac arrest in teen athletes. But he lost his bid for re-election after becoming “Public Enemy No. 1” of the anti-vaccine movement when he sought to restrict nonmedical exemptions to the state’s school vaccination requirements.

Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Scott Gottlieb, MD, was the recipient of the award for outstanding member of the executive branch in career public service by presidential appointment. His work to approve more generic drugs was among his achievements that were cited—along with the FDA’s intent to ban the sale of flavored e-cigarettes.

Upon receiving the award, Dr. Gottlieb spoke about his pride in the “esprit de corps” of the FDA staff who continued working during the recent government shutdown to ensure that “nothing bad happened on our watch.”

He later tweeted: “This honor is a reflection of the important public health work that the FDA does on behalf of Americans and the dedication of the agency’s professional staff in the execution of that critical mission.”