Pioneer on rare genetic disease research among 5 honored by AMA

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The AMA has recognized five people for significant contributions to advance public health during their careers as elected officials or career government employees at the state, local or national level.

Dan Kastner, MD, PhD

A research pioneer in rare genetic diseases was one of the recipients of the prestigious AMA Award for Government Service. Dan Kastner, MD, PhD, devoted his more than three-decade career to diagnosing and treating rare genetic diseases characterized by fever and inflammation that often result in disabling conditions and death. His work has provided detailed molecular explanations for these illnesses.
Dr. Kastner directs the National Human Genome Research Institute’s division of intramural research and heads the inflammatory disease section. He has seen his work become the conceptual basis for effective targeted therapies. It has informed medicine’s understanding of more common illnesses as well.

“Dr. Kastner established a clinic for patients with undiagnosed inflammatory illnesses from around the world,” said AMA Board Chair Russ Kridel, MD. “Parents credit him with saving their children’s lives and significantly reducing their suffering.”

Watch Dr. Kastner’s acceptance speech.

**John R. Baird, MD, MPH**

A former State Medical Officer for the North Dakota Department of Health, Dr. Baird dedicated his life to improving community health. He started his career at a five-person clinic, then developed the state’s first federally funded community health care center at the University of North Dakota.

Dr. Baird has worked with state legislators to update the death investigation system, revamp tuberculosis statutes and start needle-exchange programs. He wrote opioid policy and signed standard naloxone orders that significantly reduced overdose deaths in North Dakota.
“People across North Dakota have benefited from his tenacity, giving and dedication,” Dr. Kridel said.

Watch Dr. Baird’s acceptance speech.

Darlene Chee

The CEO of the Indian Health Service (Navajo Area) and the Chinle Comprehensive Healthcare Facility, Chee was honored for dedicating her career to improve health care access and equity for her community.

The 34-year Indian Health Service veteran started her career as a health technician. She is an advocate for culturally competent health services and has been a driving force in promoting the Chinle Healthcare Facilities’ Native Medicine program. The program uses traditional structures such as Hogans and sweat lodges on a regular basis and provides traditional songs and ceremonies in the Navajo language for patients and staff. Most recently, Chee has led her team through the pandemic’s challenges.

Watch Chee’s acceptance speech.
Ray C. Funnye

Funnye is Georgetown County, South Carolina’s public services director and founder and executive director of The Village Group. He understands that economic and educational opportunities are crucial to each person’s health and to achieving health equity.

He has spent nearly three decades as a public servant in his hometown, overseeing more than 100 employees and seven divisions. He manages the County Stormwater Division to safeguard access to clean water in coastal communities.

As executive director of The Village Group, Funnye engages youth in the rural, Black community of Plantersville, South Carolina, through literacy, after-school, and summer programs. The Village Group also takes children on field trips to museums, universities and businesses. Funnye also launched the Village Flyers Bike Club, which promotes healthy lifestyle habits among local youth.

Watch Funnye’s acceptance speech.

Liane Jollon
As executive director of San Juan Basin Public Health in Durango, Colorado, Jollon has focused on children and families' health by working on issues such as housing, violence prevention, economic and access to health care.

Colorado Gov. Jared Polis appointed Jollon to the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission, where she helped implement sweeping mission change to protect the health of Colorado residents. Most recently, she’s tackled the pandemic's challenges.

“From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ms. Jollon has worked with leaders in the region and throughout the state to develop and communicate a coordinated public health response,” Dr. Kridel said.

Watch Jollon’s acceptance speech.