

2017 New York Academy of Medicine Gala Remarks by Jo Ivey Boufford, MD

I'm very honored to receive this award and happily accept it on behalf of the incredibly talented and dedicated staff, our Fellows and our partners from around the City, State, nation and the globe.

A special thanks to George Thibault for his leadership and Tom Morris as chair emeritus during my time here, and to all of our dedicated Trustees and emeritus trustees whose support and advocacy is so critical to our success.

I promise I won't be providing a detailed look back over the past 10 years, because our terrific Communications and Development teams working with staff colleagues and skillful writers (some from our journalism prize) and members of our East Harlem community have created a wonderful magazine which you'll get as you leave. It provides highlights from the last 10 years, but most importantly shows the clear ways in which the work of this past decade has built on the Academy's history.

When I was hired as President, the Board then led by Dr. Thomas Morris asked me to develop a presence for the Academy in health policy to add to its reputation for research developed under my predecessor, Dr. Barondess, and to build on the historic strengths of its Fellowship and the Library.

Policy work is really a logical extension of the Academy's practice since its founding—originally producing reports created by its Fellows on critical health issues of the day, drawing on their individual expertise and that of their colleagues and using their own personal influence and the institutional credibility of the Academy to help implement the changes called for in the reports.

In a very real sense, influencing the policies that shape clinical practice and the health opportunities for our communities can have broad impact, allowing a relatively small organization like the Academy to “punch above its weight” as they say.

As we all know, the policy process is a social and political activity and to be effective, multiple stakeholders have to be engaged to both help shape and eventually support the desired change, including (and especially) the voices of communities affected by the proposed policy, and this is a special commitment of the Academy in all our work.

Over the past decade, the Academy's research, evaluation, policy and program initiatives have had a major impact on improving the lives of New Yorkers and people in cities around the world. Brought together in 2015 as the Academy's Institute for Urban Health, we have made significant strides in each of our three priority areas: healthy aging, prevention, and eliminating health disparities.

Many of these issues seem obvious now, but 10 years ago, when we selected them as priorities, few were getting the attention they needed and deserved.

We got questions like “Why urban health?”—that one was easy—because nearly 80 percent of the US population lives in cities, as does the majority of the world!! So if you want to have impact on the largest numbers—go where the people are.

The other was, “Why aren't you working on X?—it's easier to understand, more likely to help the Academy become more visible, attract support, all things non-profits need to do.” There were two answers to this one: first, there were other organizations working very effectively on many of these issues, and second, our unique role as an Academy has often been to take up those issues that the evidence tells us should have more attention but have not received it for different reasons. So we marshal the evidence, identify the right partners, develop our messages and work to create the conditions for action by those in power to make change:

Whether it is from the sanitary conditions in 19th century NYC, to the creation of early childhood feeding programs; the creation of the Board of Health as one of the first in a US city; addressing maternal mortality in the 30s and now again, sadly, in the second decade of this century; legalizing medical marijuana in the 50s and now addressing the opioid epidemic; HIV/AIDS and harm reduction; and PTSD after 9/11 and now strategies to address the broad determinants of health that shape conditions for health and healthy aging in communities, especially those that experience the greatest disparities.

A special resource of the academy is our Library, which holds one of the world's most significant collections of the history of medicine and public health, much of it left to us by our Fellows since 1847. Our decision to focus on stewardship of this collection and develop programming to share the collection with the public in addition to our traditional scholarly audience has not only begun to establish the Library and the Academy as an important participant in the city's cultural landscape, but everyday reinforces our unique opportunity to learn from the past to shape the future.

And finally, the Fellowship is the essence of this academy and "Academies" worldwide: professionals elected by their peers to honor their individual accomplishments and to use the unique platform that independent academies can provide as a vehicle for service to society beyond their individual efforts.

One of my personal priorities has been strengthening the engagement of our Fellows with the Academy in the face of the challenges of a world very different from the one in which the Academy was first formed—a world without multiple medical libraries, when the only Continuing Medical Education in the city was provided here, and when the pace and pressure on the clinical and research communities was very different.

Our 30-year Fellows articulate the importance of this organization to their personal and professional development every year when we recognize them at our Annual Meeting, and I'm delighted to see the work of so many of our Fellows Sections engaging students, graduate students and residents, and Fellows in their

specialties and disciplines in Academy programs early in their careers, as they are the future.

At a time when the credibility of even the most trusted institutions is being questioned, the role of science and its evidence and respect for the evidence of experience of the communities we serve is critical to defend. We also need places that can convene people of different views and interests to come together and solve problems and develop shared recommendations for action on problems important to society. Finally, we need institutions that can be trusted to work with others; have the patience (and yes longevity) to advance effective action, sometimes taking risks to rise above their own self-interest when necessary.

This Academy has been that platform for change in the health of cities for most of its history, and all of us here take that responsibility and the trust it implies very seriously in all our work.

So the challenge has been and will continue to be co-creating the Academy for the future.

One critical element is continuing our efforts to expand our base of Fellows, their disciplines, career stages and their areas of expertise, and to provide support for increasing the Fellows and our staff working together in different ways on critical health issues.

We have also built on our history of research partnerships with community organizations to increase our on the ground engagement with our community here in East Harlem—opening our doors to community events, participating in coalitions to advance health and socioeconomic well-being—listening and learning what role

we can best play in addressing the serious health and economic concerns of those living and working in East Harlem.

It has been a personal pleasure and an important learning experience for me to work with the leaders of this vibrant community, many of whom have joined us here tonight and I want to thank them for welcoming us into what I hope will be long and productive partnerships for the Academy.

At our annual meeting this past year, we launched our new “image” which, in a very real sense returned to our roots as an organization championing urban health and sharpened our message about the assets of the Academy—our Institute for Urban Health, our Library and our Fellows—a unique and powerful combination which should serve as a solid foundation for the next chapter in the life of this remarkable organization as it continues to advance individual and community health in NYC and cities around the world.

My own commitment to urban health—its challenges and opportunities—began at the Martin Luther King Health Center in the South Bronx in 1971 when I came from Ann Arbor, Michigan to begin my pediatric residency as part of the Social Medicine program at Montefiore. I have to say it was a bit of a shock—from staying overnight at the then Concourse Plaza Hotel, having the taxi driver who brought me down to the Center from Montefiore—the mothership—ask me, “Why are they sending you down there—aren’t you good enough to stay at the teaching hospital?” That, of course, became a challenge, the Bronx was burning at that time, and it was clear to me that while access to excellent health care is critical, it is an important,

but small part of what is needed to create and sustain health. It's a lesson that has stayed with me throughout my career.

I am honored to have been given this opportunity to provide leadership to an organization that has had this understanding embedded in its mission since its founding in 1847 and has been committed to acting on it.

My thanks to our talented and dedicated staff who actually direct our many programs and initiatives and develop and maintain the partnerships so critical to our success.

It is through their efforts, and the day-to-day efforts of our 2,000-plus Fellows on the front lines of public health, clinical care, research and policy and the support of our Board that The Academy will continue to play such a critical role in changing the landscape of health in cities for years to come.

I look forward to returning to this party in future years without a speaking role and working as an active Fellow of the Academy to continue improving population health in NYC and cities around the world.

Thank you again for this recognition.