

FOR RELEASE AFTER 12:00 Noon  
FRIDAY, MAY 10, 1968

Office of the Press Secretary  
to Mrs. Johnson

THE WHITE HOUSE

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REMARKS OF MRS. LYNDON B. JOHNSON AT THE PRESENTATION  
OF THE ANNUAL ALBERT AND MARY LASKER AWARDS TO  
MEDICAL JOURNALISTS - ST. REGIS HOTEL - NEW YORK CITY

I'm delighted to be here: First, to pay tribute to the Lasker Award winners of 1968: writers, editors and a TV network who are communicating the dramatic story of health progress in America.

Second, I simply cannot pass the opportunity to pay tribute to a good and devoted friend; a champion of noble causes; a determined leader -- and, as the President and Congress can attest, a persistent lobbyist! Mary Lasker. Mary represents no special interests; her cause is the public interest -- and so when her causes win, all of us are the winners.

I think it is clear that in the field of health, we are living in an age of spectacular scientific and governmental breakthroughs.

To the doctor and the research scientist, those breakthroughs can be seen in statistics and on the steady lines of the charts: lines pointing upward, to increased funds; lines pointing downward, as old diseases are controlled or conquered.

To those of us who are laymen -- but who care deeply about what is happening in health -- the breakthroughs appear in different ways.

Not long ago, a friend told me a story about her secretary's experience with Medicare. Her mother was seriously ill for fifteen years, and the young woman took care of her all that time. Soon after her mother died, her sister was hospitalized with a malignancy. Her illness would have meant another burden -- more years of enslavement. Sad as she was, there is a silver lining. Because of Medicare, she didn't have that financial responsibility; the next years of her life would be her own.

I told my friend that nothing could mean more to the President than his part in advocating that great program -- and in helping it become the law of the land.

It is a great satisfaction to him -- and to me -- that the past few years have been a time of growth for our health efforts. Certainly the government can play only a limited role -- but it can provide a rallying voice and a guiding hand, and it is doing that.

Some time ago, I visited a Job Corps Center. I had thought, like most Americans, that its first and only purpose was to train young men for useful work. But the director of the center opened my eyes to an unexpected benefit. Of all the boys arriving at the center, he told me, fully half had never visited a doctor or a dentist. They came from homes where chronic physical and mental defects were commonplace -- and uncared for. Here, for the first time, these young men received treatment which could change their lives.

In the same way, the Head Start program is helping not only young minds but small bodies. So many times, I have heard heartbreaking stories of children enrolling in Head Start who were partially blind or deaf or chronically ill. But the stories have happy endings. And together, those stories tell a great deal about what is really happening in America today.

So much is happening.

But so much remains undone.

\*America's infant mortality rate is still distressingly high. Among advanced nations, we rank fifteenth in saving babies' lives. Secretary Cohen has rightly called that fact a national scandal.

\*Mental illness continues to be a major health problem. We have built nearly 300 community mental health centers. But we have a long way to go in caring for the mentally ill and the mentally handicapped.

\*We have major unfinished business in speeding research knowledge to the patient's bedside.

\*Incredible as it may seem, hundreds of thousands of Americans still do not have a decent diet.

\*The distance between the test tube and the hospital bed are still too far.

Again and again, we come up against the fact that there is a serious information gap which handicaps us in health, and which keeps us from making the progress we should.

And this is where you come in: where the Lasker Foundation and the nation's medical reporters and concerned laymen do a great public service.

I heard a story from a social worker in Texas which has haunted me ever since. A Mexican-American woman, the mother of ten, was suspected of neglect because her youngest child died of malnutrition. When a social worker visited her, she found at least a year's accumulation of government-surplus food stored in a shed in the back of the house. That mother loved her children. But she spoke no English, and after she picked up the food each week, she didn't know what to do with it.

The information gap, in this case, was truly fatal.

If we can bridge that gap -- if we can make sure that all our gains in research and treatment and government action actually reach their targets -- the gains will be beyond measuring.

There is no statistic -- no graph -- which can measure a mother's gratitude when her children do not get measles or polio because a safe vaccine has been found and put into wide use.

There is no yardstick for measuring the happiness in a home whose breadwinner, though he suffers from high blood pressure, is safe because new drugs are available for his use.

Nor is there any yardstick to measure what the typewriters and telephones of 200 medical reporters have done to bring better health to our Nation.

Surely everyone in this room can think of lives that have been touched with real impact by a story in the newspaper or a message on the air. There

is a growing number of medical reporters in this country -- many of them within the last few years. They're the ones who make the public aware that research is going on. They are the reason the public will support the big budgets of government and volunteer agencies which are necessary to help get the results from the test tube to the feverish children in the hospital.

While this array of knowledgeable reporters increases, they know that it is harder and harder to get their story in the paper or on the air. The explosion of news reduces their chances to tell the daily struggle of life and death which has such unseen dramatic results.

I am so glad that there are awards as we have here today which remind us once again that amid the daily headlines of tragedy, there is a steady story that America's investment in better health care is paying off.

To your winners, who have told this story so well, I offer the salute and the gratitude of the President, and I am sure of the whole country.

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