

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Year 2009 *AJPH* Author of the Year: Jay W. Friedman, DDS, MPH

Deborah Holtzman, PhD, MSW, *Department Editor, AJPH*



It is my great pleasure to announce the Journal's annual award to the 2009 Author of the Year, Jay W. Friedman, for his outstanding contribution to public health. When *AJPH* Editor-in-Chief, Mary Northridge,

invited me to write a few words by way of introduction, I was more than delighted to do so. I read "The Prophylactic Extraction of Third Molars: A Public Health Hazard" (*Am J Public*

Health. 2007; 97:1554–1559) shortly after it was published. It came to my attention because my husband, who often grabs my issue of the Journal when it comes in the mail, read it first and said, "You have to read this." And while public health is not my husband's area of expertise, Jay Friedman's article confirmed what he said he knew all along, i.e., removal of wisdom teeth is often an unnecessary medical procedure. My husband did not actually know this since he had not seen the data, but after we both read the article, we were sufficiently convinced that we did not want our 2 youngest children to have their wisdom teeth removed, despite their dentist's desire to do just that.

There have been other articles in the Journal from which I have learned, which have inspired me to think differently about an issue, and have motivated me to act. Jay Friedman's article was one of these, and it's so nice when an article like this hits home. He carefully documented the evidence and calculated the risk that clearly shows the negative impact on the public's health, or in his words, the public health hazard, of the prophylactic extraction of third molars, a practice that undoubtedly should not be continued. For substantially contributing to the Journal's mission of advancing public health, it is therefore my honor and privilege to introduce Jay W. Friedman as the 2009 *AJPH* Author of the Year. ■

Nomination of Jay W. Friedman, DDS, MPH, as Year 2009 *AJPH* Author of the Year

Alice M. Horowitz, PhD, *Editorial Board, AJPH*



This nomination has been in the making for at least 30 years, because for as long as I have known our author of the year, Jay Friedman, his *raison d'être* has been prevention of over-treatment in dentistry, not least of

which is the rampant extraction of third molars, aka wisdom teeth.

Jay asked me to review a draft of his manuscript, anticipating that I would be supportive. He was right. I recommended that he submit it to the *Journal*, rather than a more narrowly focused dental journal, to reach a much broader audience with the likelihood that fewer young adults would be exposed to injury from unnecessary extractions.

Considering that the *Journal* receives hundreds of submission, it was not surprising that a paper on dental extractions, which at first glance seemed more appropriate for a dental journal, would be rejected *sans review*. A month later an article appeared in the *Journal* on the number of sports injuries to teeth that was small compared with wisdom tooth injuries. Thereupon, Jay appealed to the editor, "If you could publish a paper in which the injuries are perhaps in the hundreds, how could you not even consider one that depicts lifetime injuries annually to tens of thousands?" This time he received a short personal note from the editor, Mary Northridge, referring to the backlog of papers. Convinced she missed the point, Jay wrote back again emphasizing the public health hazard, concluding, "If you find my argument irresistible, the paper is still available." Mary in her infinite wisdom, and likely in need of getting this author off her back, replied, "Kindly resubmit your paper. . . . I will handle the peer review myself."

The rest is, as they say, history. The paper was published in the September 2007 issue of the *Journal*. But the story does not end there. Jay and I organized a session at the annual APHA meeting the following month. His PowerPoint presentation, along with other panel speakers, was convincing. Consequently, at its business meeting, the Oral Health Section members voted unanimously to prepare a resolution opposing prophylactic removal of third molars. Jay drafted the resolution (no. 20085), which was adopted by APHA at the annual meeting in 2008.

He then drafted cover letters signed by the executive director of APHA and the presiding officer of the Oral Health Section to accompany a copy of the resolution that was sent to state Medicaid administrators, medical and dental insurance companies, dental organizations, and health reporters urging them to publicize and adopt the policy. Hopefully, this will not be the end

of the story, as there is a continual need to better inform the public, the professions, and administrators of health insurance of the hazards and costs of unnecessary treatment.

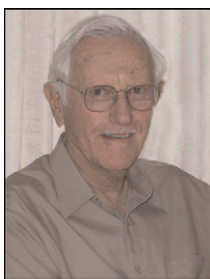
The mission of the Journal is to promote public health research, policy, practice and education. Jay's paper, "The Prophylactic Extraction of Third Molars: A Public Health Hazard," encompasses each aspect in that his

paper translates research into appropriate use via policy, education and, we are optimistic, clinical practice.

It is my distinct pleasure to nominate Jay W. Friedman as the 2009 AJPH Author of the Year. ■

Acceptance of the Year 2009 *AJPH* Author of the Year Award

Jay W. Friedman, DDS, MPH



Prevention of disease is a primary goal of public health. Yet, many preventive procedures such as vaccinations contain inherent risks to a very small percentage of recipients that are outweighed by their overall

benefits to the overwhelming majority of the public. In this regard, many if not most dentists and virtually all oral surgeons contend that early extraction of wisdom teeth prevents serious pathology in the future. Prior to this paper, for which I have been honored as 2009 Author of the Year, studies reported a small percentage of injury to individuals without reference to the actual number of people injured each year.

Previously, I had published 2 papers (1977 and 1983) demonstrating that prophylactic extraction of asymptomatic wisdom teeth was an enormous waste of money, considering the small risk of future pathology; money that

could be better spent on real health care needs. Regardless, prophylactic extraction of wisdom teeth continues for those with the money or dental insurance to pay for it, with nary an indication that those who retain their teeth are suffering widespread disease as a consequence.

In 2006, I was invited to speak to a group of dental consultants and chose the review of insurance claims for wisdom tooth extractions to illustrate overtreatment and overcharging and how easy it would be to curtail these abuses by adopting an evidence-based policy of need. As I reviewed the current literature, I came across an obscure reference to 10 million wisdom tooth extractions being done each year in the United States. Ten million! From then on it was simple math. Ten million extractions translates to as many as 5 million people. The percentage of permanent injury, mainly to sensory nerves of the lower jaw, is small. But the number of people injured each year is large; in the tens of thousands. Most of it is preventable.

Because the injury is not life-threatening, one hears little of it. But that is changing. Just

this past year, APHA adopted a policy (no. 20085), Opposition to Prophylactic Removal of Third Molars (Wisdom Teeth), submitted by the Oral Health Section as a follow-up to this paper. Curtailing this injurious practice will save tens of thousands from injury and billions of dollars in cost, goals that are at the center of the current health care reform movement.

Though hardly unique and too often ignored, my paper illustrates that what is usually considered an acceptably small risk of injury to an individual may be a public health hazard when applied to the entire population. If there is a moral to this story, it is that we must look beyond the trees if we are to see the forest.

I am particularly indebted to Mary E. Northridge, editor-in-chief of *AJPH*, who was instrumental in the review and publication of my paper and consideration of this award. And, I am so proud to have received it from the foremost public health journal in the world. ■

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