Acceptance of the WFPHA Lifetime Achievement Award
Theodor Abelin

Thank you, Ulrich, for these flattering words, and thank you all for honoring me with the Federation's Lifetime Achievement Award.

When I was told that the World Federation of Public Health Associations was going to honor me for my lifetime achievements, I wondered on what among the different facets of my work this could be based. Was it my work as an epidemiologist, or as a teacher or as an activist devoting much of my available time to non-governmental organizations?

The challenge started for me in the late 1950s, when as a medical student, I asked my Professor of Pathology dissecting a patient having died of lung cancer, whether it was true that lung cancer had something to do with smoking – and his response was „don’t ask silly questions“. I will always be thankful to him for this challenging answer that motivated me to do research on the health effects and the prevention of smoking, and later, on the causes of other non-infectious diseases.

My professional life was always exciting – being marked by the continuous widening of the horizon of public health: from tobacco to further risk factors; from individual medical advice to community-wide preventive action; from prevention to health promotion; from focusing on biomedical causative mechanisms to the social and economic determinants of health. And this in turn led to the latest challenge, which is to develop strategies for taking health into account in other sectors. I learned much about the type of lobbying for health that is needed in this context, when I had the privilege of representing the World Federation during the negotiations for the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

As new approaches to prevention developed, my focus has usually been on what this meant in terms of adapting organizational structures to new circumstances.
This has also applied to the World Federation of Public Health Associations, where during the last 15 or 20 years, a major challenge has been to adapt the working methods and organizational structures to the challenges of globalization.

For decades, most of the work for the World Federation had been done at the Secretariat in Washington, generously made available by the American Public Health Association, while the elected Officers had more representative functions. But in the course of the years, often after young public health professionals trained in North America and Britain, had returned home, new national Public Health Associations were created around the world and joined a growing and increasingly dynamic WFPHA community.

I had the chance of belonging to the WFPHA leadership during the years, when the Federation reorganized to adapt to these developments, and I interpret the decision to honor me with the Lifetime Achievement Award as an expression of recognition of this development. In this sense, I am pleased to accept the Award. Thank you very much. Thank you!