

# **HISTORY OF THE NEW MEXICO SCIENTIFIC LABORATORY SYSTEM**

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## **The Public Health Laboratory**

The New Mexico Public Health Laboratory, located on North Terrace Street on the UNM campus, was built in 1937. For many years, the building shared occupancy with some laboratories and offices of the UNM Biology Department, but the Public Health Laboratory eventually occupied the entire building. The facility became overcrowded, dirty and vermin infested. Equipment and supplies were in short supply, as were the budget and professional recognition. Morale was low, and laboratory results, particularly in the area of chemistry, were frequently of questionable validity. Every employee of the Public Health Laboratory signed and submitted a list of grievances to Laboratory Director Dr. Daniel Johnson in 1970. The grievances related to:

*....obsolete equipment, lack of proper supplies, health and safety hazards in the laboratory, inadequate training program, inequities in hiring, low salary scales with little effort to remedy the situation, lack of proper communication within the laboratory and with related programs and institutions, and steadily deteriorating public image situation.*

## **The Environmental Laboratory**

We began attempting to address the chemistry inadequacy in 1971 by developing a small environmental laboratory in a vacant Game and Fish Department warehouse in Santa Fe. My brother, Ladd S. Gordon, was Game and Fish Director and he allowed us to utilize the building at no cost. But the Santa Fe lab was also inadequately equipped, understaffed, and inadequate to meet rapidly growing needs for timely, accurate laboratory services.

By 1972, we moved the embryonic environmental laboratory to Albuquerque where it really belonged. My old friend Howell G. "Bud" Ervien was City Property Management Director. Bud allowed us to utilize a city-owned building at Montessa Park south of Albuquerque. The city furnished the building and all utilities. We were able to acquire additional equipment and personnel and upgrade chemistry services considerably.

However, the Public Health Laboratory and the Environmental Laboratory still were not adequate to provide the necessary quantity and quality of services essential to program requirements.

## **The Scientific Laboratory System**

In 1972, I wrote HSSD Executive Director Dick Heim proposing 1) an organization to be known as the New Mexico Scientific Laboratory System, and 2) a modern, well equipped laboratory facility to be located in Albuquerque. I wrote that:

*A Public Health Laboratory was one of the first components authorized in the Department of Health when it was created more than forty years ago. The Public Health Laboratory attempted to supply laboratory services for the Public Health Department, and was quartered in a new building on the University of New Mexico Campus in 1937. This building was built with \$10,000 in State funds and \$37,000 from the Federal Public Works Authority and was constructed in such a manner and at such a location that it has been impossible to enlarge or re-design the interior. The Public Health Laboratory has frequently been over-looked and nearly forgotten in the budgetary process; and Health Agency program personnel have tended, in the past, to assume that the Health Laboratory would continue to provide necessary service without additional financial support even when new or enlarged programs demanded such support. As a result, the Public Health Laboratory facilities, organization and services have not been able to keep pace with the State's growth or the laboratory services required by various health programs.*

*For many years, the Public Health Laboratory attempted to provide laboratory services for various sanitation programs, but such services were not adequate either in quality or quantity. With the recent and current emphasis on problems of the environment and concurrent with the creation of the New Mexico Environmental Improvement Agency, the EIA has attempted to provide laboratory services to support such programs as air pollution control, water pollution control, water supply, insect and rodent control, food sanitation, milk sanitation, occupational health and safety, swimming pool sanitation and safety, and others.*

*The lack of suitable facilities and equipment for EIA laboratory services has been a source of continuing frustration to the Agency and the Department. It is essential to provide accurate and rapid laboratory results to support EIA programs, both in fairness to those being regulated and to the public-at-large.*

Within a short time we were contacted by several UNM Medical School faculty who recommended that the facility also be designed to provide space and facilities for the Office of the Medical Investigator, and that much of the laboratory services required by the Medical Investigator be provided by the Scientific Laboratory System.

Dick Heim supported the proposal and submitted it to Governor Bruce King for his approval. I again worked with Representative Jamie Koch of Santa Fe to develop a proposal for the 1973 legislature. Politically, Jamie preferred that the facility be located in Santa Fe. However, Jamie understood and supported our recommendation to locate it on the UNM Campus.

In the 1973 Legislature, I requested \$5 million for the joint SLS-OMI facility, and obtained UNM Board of Regents approval to locate it on the UNM campus. The legislative process was not smooth or easy, and at one point the request was entirely deleted in the Senate. I drove home to Albuquerque after midnight thoroughly worn out and frustrated. But the next morning, I was in Santa Fe early to locate Representative Jamie Koch and get the process started anew in the House. An allocation of \$2.5 million was finally authorized. That was only half of the original request.

I asked Dick Heim to appoint me as Director of the New Mexico Scientific Laboratory System. I wanted to organize and set the mission and policies for the new organization, which would be derived from the pre-existing Public Health and Environmental Laboratories.

Dick then promoted Aaron Bond to Director, Environmental Improvement Agency.

Construction commenced in 1973, and our troubles had only begun. The architect did not prevent numerous cost overruns, and the State Property Control Division did not prevent or control the overruns. The project was soon out of money and I had to return to the 1975 Legislature with a supplemental request. This supplemental request certainly wasn't popular with the legislators, but additional funding was finally allocated. Even after construction was completed, we found that there were serious defects in the design of the heating and cooling systems, so I had to return to the Legislature for more money.

It was a difficult and sometimes stressful project, but in retrospect it was worth it. New Mexico citizens were served by one of the most modern, best equipped and staffed state laboratories in the nation. The final cost was in excess of 5 million dollars —, not far from my original request.

And the laboratory was, and still is, unique. The organization and facility were designed to provide laboratory services to all tax-supported federal, state, and local agencies in New Mexico requiring such services on a reimbursable cost basis. Other states have individual, often inadequate laboratories serving such client agencies as public health, environmental protection, substance abuse, occupational health and safety, game and fish, Indian Health Service, family planning, medical investigator, highway traffic safety commission, local law enforcement, etc. By taking a comprehensive approach, we were able to provide a superior organization, facility, equipment and services for our citizens.

We were able to positively improve professionalism, training, quality control,

organizational arrangements, supervision, client relationships, budgets, job specifications, salary levels, and inter-agency communication and coordination.

During the first term of Bruce King, we evaluated laboratory facilities, equipment, and personnel and determined that services could be improved by closing the small, inadequate Farmington Branch Laboratory and transferring the personnel to the new, modern facility in Albuquerque. This would have improved services, quality control, training and supervision. I received verbal approval for this action from Dick Heim, State Planning Officer (and Governor King's nephew) David King, and the Governor. I then issued written notice of the change. But I hadn't duly recognized the politics of the situation. We soon had protests from the City of Farmington, San Juan County, the Four Corners Regional Commission, the Indian Health Service, and the Navajo Tribe. With these protests in hand, Governor King elected to state that he hadn't approved the action.

Another good idea bit the dust. Bad politics on my part!

We promoted or recruited several laboratory professionals who became nationally and internationally recognized in the fields of public health and laboratory science. Among these:

Loris Hughes, was promoted to Chief Biological Sciences Division, later entered the private sector for a short time, and I recruited him to return as Laboratory Director where he has performed in an exemplary manner since 1981.

Mike Skeels, recruited from the Montana State Laboratory, did an outstanding job in the New Mexico SLD, became Oregon Public Health Laboratory Director, and subsequently State Health Director in Oregon.

Sylvia Taborelli, who was with the previous Public Health Laboratory, was promoted, earned her Master of Public Health degree, became Quality Control Supervisor, and was later appointed SLD Deputy Director.

Many states have attempted to emulate the New Mexico model, but have found it impossible to overcome the influence of their already existing, fragmented laboratory organizations and their various "turf" imperatives.

The Scientific Laboratory System became the Scientific Laboratory Division of the Health and Environment Department when Governor Jerry Apodaca worked with the legislature to reorganize state government and create the cabinet form of government in 1977.

At the dedication of a new addition to the SLD in 1987 while I was Cabinet Secretary for Health and Environment, I noted that:

*The Scientific Laboratory Division serves all New Mexicans through analyzing the*

*food we eat, the air we breathe, the water we drink, and checking for such diseases as plague, rabies, AIDs and cancer; and analyzing for carcinogens, pesticides, toxic chemicals, drugs, alcohol and radiation. It is the silent, but essential, partner to the efforts of the Environmental Improvement Division, the Public Health Division, and many others in order to protect and promote the health, safety, comfort and well-being of all New Mexicans.*

It is interesting to note the following quote from Myrtle Greenfield's book, A History of Public Health in New Mexico:

*Newspapers were not particularly supportive of early efforts to develop a State Health Department. One editor suggested that a State Health Commissioner would be enough, another suggested that since the Public Health Nurse would be essential, that only a nurse would be needed. And still another believed that the Commissioner of Health would have knowledge of sanitation, and there was no need for a sanitary engineer. Others believed that the salary of a bacteriologist (\$2,000) and the cost of a laboratory could be saved as there was a bacteriologist in Albuquerque who could provide all the bacteriological examinations necessary for no more than \$250 per year.*

Life must have been much simpler in 1919!