Dr. Philip Chen

This is the second interview in a series on the career of Dr. Philip Chen. It was conducted on February 22, 2001, in his office on the first floor of Building 1, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland. The Interviewer is Dr. Buhm Soon Park.

Park: Thank you very much again.

Today I'd like to start with briefly going back to your commissioned officer time at NIH in the years between 1956 and '59. You mentioned that you came to NIH as a commissioned officer to fulfill your draft requirement, and you mentioned also your interaction with clinical associates and briefly describing the environment, research environment, in the Clinical Center at the time. And I'm wondering whether there were M.D.s, medical doctors, coming as commissioned officers, PHS commissioned officers as well.

Chen: Yeah. Most of the U.S. physicians, the younger ones, coming to NIH at that time were commissioned officers in the Public Health Service, and I was a Ph.D. commissioned officer as well. In our group, it was mainly M.D.s, but across the hall or in other labs, there may have been mainly Ph.D.s, biochemistry or pharmacology labs.

Park: And the clinical associates were also commissioned officers?

Chen: Yeah. Clinical associates were practically all commissioned officers back then.

Park: Uh-huh, Public Health Service commissioned officers.

Chen: That's right, yeah.

Park: I see. And so there were pretty many Ph.D.s as well as...

Chen: Some Ph.D.s were commissioned officers. Many Ph.D.s were civil service.

Park: Civil service.

Chen: Yeah.

Park: I see. And at that time, did you choose your research project or did your preceptor ask you to do something _____?

Chen: When I came, the head of the branch, Fred Barter [sp.], was working on aldosterol, so he put me on a or suggested the project involving an analytical method for determining aldosterol, which I worked on. But then I had the opportunity of working on other things as well, so it was not a directed research program. We were pretty free to do various things.

Park: I see. And did you learn any new techniques or new knowledge at the time?

Chen: Oh, yeah. There were a lot of new things that could be learned here, not only from people within the branch, but also from other groups around the NIH that I interacted with. There were groups working on adrenal steroids, so I worked on some fluorescence methods, analytical methods, radioactive labeling methods. There was liquid scintillation counting for carbon-14, and tridium was coming into the forefront then, and I learned how to do double labeling using a double isotope-dilution method.

Fluorescence analysis was being pioneered here by Sidney Udenfrend [sp.] and others in the Heart Institute. So I had the opportunity of learning all kinds of new things here.

Park: Did you learn mainly within the Heart Institute or across the...

Chen: Across several institutes. The Arthritis, Metabolic Diseases Institute was one that I interacted with a little more than others, but both the Heart Institute and the Arthritis Institute.

Park: I see. So it was a good opportunity for the postdoctoral fellows to learn something. And did you take any night school, night classes at the time?

Chen: I did not, no. I did take a correspondence course that commissioned officers were offered the opportunity of taking on emergency management of the national economy, which was given by the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, but that was just for fun.

Park: In 1959, you came back to the University of Rochester as an assistant professor. Could you describe what made you come back to that place?

Chen: Well, the military obligation was obviously just two years. I actually stayed a little more than three years, and I could have made a career staying at the NIH. But in 1959, I was offered a position back at the University of Rochester, where I had gotten my Ph.D. degree, and I guess I decided I'd like to try going back to academia. I don't know if, in retrospect, it was the best thing to do, but for various reasons, I decided to try that.

Park: What kind of research did you do there?

Chen: Well, the group that I rejoined was this bone research group, calcium

metabolism, and I was interested in vitamin D. I had actually gotten interested in vitamin D when I was still at the NIH because another member of our group was looking into vitamin D analysis and action. And so when I went back to Rochester, I decided to work on vitamin D principally.

Park: And it seems to me that you made very important discoveries. You wrote important papers at the time, in the early '60s?

Chen: Well, yeah. We published some papers on vitamin D and related sterols, did a lot of work in chickens, and I worked on some analytical methods for vitamin D separation and analysis as well as various other research projects, _____ projects that we carried out at that time.

Park: Did you write grant proposals?

Chen: Not in the same sense as people, that the NIH grantees do today. We did kind of a mini-grant proposal within the Department of Radiation Biology and Biophysics at Rochester because my research was supported by the Atomic Energy Commission contract, so all I had to do was justify my budget to my superiors at Rochester, but not on a national scale, and they would defend the overall request to the Atomic Energy Commission.

Park: I see. So you didn't write for the NIH funds.

Chen: No, not at that time. People there today, of course, are supported by NIH grants primarily, so it's a much more competitive atmosphere today than it was back then for me.

Park: And after spending three years at NIH as a commissioned officer and going back to academia, how did you see NIH at the time, in the early 1960s? As

a very rapidly growing institution? And what is your perception of NIH in the early '60s?

Chen: Well, I think at that time I was not too sensitive to how important NIH was going to be as an extramural supporter of research. I think various people have, at Rochester, were applying for grants, but I actually did not know very much about that process, and I didn't keep up too much with happenings at NIH at that time.

Park: I see. And in 1966, you got, you received a Guggenheim fellowship _____ and spending a year in Copenhagen again?

Chen: That's right, yeah. It was a sabbatical. And I had been at Rochester actually more than six years. Usually a sabbatical is every seventh year. I'd been there over seven years and felt that it would be worthwhile to have a sabbatical year away and that Copenhagen would be a good place because my wife had come from there and I had been there before, so I was successful in getting a Guggenheim fellowship.

Park: I see. And in 1967, you came back to NIH. Could you describe the situation at the time. Do you remember?

Chen: Well, I had been going to FASEB meetings regularly, Federation of American Society for Experimental Biology, and at one of these meetings I met a fellow named Joe Stateman [sp.], who was affiliated with the Grants Associate Program, which was a program designed for researchers that wishes to go into administration, primarily in the extramural programs at NIH. I met Joe at a FASEB meeting. I think it was in Atlantic City

probably around 1965 or ‘66, and was intrigued by the opportunity presented of learning how to do administration and having a slightly different kind of career path. So I applied for the program and I applied for it before I left on sabbatical, thinking that maybe I would try to go into the Grants Associates Training Program when I returned from sabbatical, and that’s, in fact, what did happen. After I came back from sabbatical, I was accepted into the program and started sometime after I returned.

Park: Did you have administrative experience before that time?

Chen: No. I really didn’t have much opportunity to do that at Rochester. I was primarily a researcher and teaching.

Park: So this is primarily for challenging yourself in a new position and new job.

Chen: Yeah.

Park: Do you have any ambition to pursue your research at the same time?

Chen: No. I felt that I would make a break, that is, leave the lab. And it requires a tremendous amount of dedication if you want to continue doing research while you’re doing administration. It’s not an easy thing, and hardly any of the grants associates did it.

Park: Going back to that Grants Associate Program, do you remember when was it created, established that program?

Chen: Yeah. It was created probably around 1963 or so, so I was in one of the relatively early classes. It probably had been going on for about four or five years at the time that I entered.

Park: Still here?

Chen: No. The program no longer exists. It tapered off in the last four or five years, and now most of the health scientist administrators in the extramural program at NIH come from, directly from a research position without general training. But they do get on-the-job training, and I think there's a seminar series that they can take for a year or so. But we had full-time, on-the-job, full-time training during that one year.

Park: What kind of training did you get? Did you get it at NIH?

Chen: At NIH and visiting other agencies. We would have a weekly seminar, and we would have some short courses, and then we'd have assignments in various institutes or in other government agencies. I spent some time at the Atomic Energy Commission, at the Bureau of the Budget, at the Office of Science and Technology, and we would go visit agencies like the National Science Foundation or NASA, CDC. We would go on site visits with people evaluating training grants, research grants, program project grants, center grants. So we had quite a broad-ranging experience during that one year of grants associate training.

Park: Who were the instructors? Many from the NIH people, kind of seniors teaching juniors, or there were professors coming from the universities teaching the administration?

Chen: No. We had an executive secretary that kind of arranged the schedules. We each had a preceptor who would work out the assignments for us based on his or her knowledge of people and job situations. When we had the seminars, they would bring in senior NIH officials like the deputy director

or director of an institute, various high officials from NIH. When we were on assignment, we would be assigned to work with someone like the executive secretary of a study section or a program director in an institute. Or if we were at the Atomic Energy Commission, we would be assigned to work with a certain group out there, following what they did, learning how they did their administration of grants and extramural awards.

Park: Do you remember your preceptor?

Chen: Yeah. My preceptor was Dr. Carl Douglas, who at that time was an associate director of the Division of Research Facilities and Resources. But he later became director of the Division of Research Grants.

Park: And how many associates in a class?

Chen: There were probably about 12 or so in any given time. People could start at any time, and they would finish a year later, so it was a staggered entry and exit from the program.

Park: And mostly coming from university positions or out of...

Chen: Most came from universities or other government agencies, like the Department of Agriculture, but a few came from the NIH itself.

Park: I see. You know, in 1967 and 1968, NIH Director James Shannon retired and the political situation changed quite a lot. You know, the Nixon Administration came and the new directors at NIH. Do you remember what kind of changes happened at the time, political or social, and...

Chen: Well, it didn't affect me that much. In 1968, I was just leaving the Grants Associates Program and took my first job here in Building 1, in the Office

of Program Planning and Evaluation. Actually, I just saw it around the corner in the office down the hall. And I guess when Shannon left, there was some turnover of the top staff within this building, in the Office of the Director, so the new director, Robert Marston [sp.], brought in his team, his top leadership.

Park: And was there any big policy changes towards, especially towards the intramural program?

Chen: I don't think so. That is, the intramural program has always been headed up by a deputy director for science, now called deputy director for intramural research, a person who was from the NIH, and most of the deputy directors had come from positions as scientific directors. Under Shannon, there was Dr. Burrows Miter [sp.]--I think they called him Bo Miter [sp.]. He had been the scientific director of the Cancer Institute. Then when Marston [sp.] came, he had Robert Berliner [sp.], scientific director of the Heart Institute. And, of course, he was a member of Shannon's laboratory and came from New York. So those two individuals came out of the scientific-director ranks. Then Berliner [sp.] was followed by DeWitt Stetten, who was scientific director of the Arthritis Institute. So these people all came out of the same tradition, and there wasn't, I don't think, a great change in the policies that would affect intramural science.

Park: That's very interesting. Did the new director, Robert Marston [sp.], ever try to change the dynamics of intramural program or change the tradition in the intramural program in terms of programming, in terms of program

planning and evaluation systems, other things, or just leave it to the scientific director to do?

Chen: I think they left it pretty much up to the scientific directors. I know that there were various kinds of planning techniques that were used from downtown that the Office of the Director had to cope with, and we worked in Dr. Tom Kennedy's Office of Program Planning and Evaluation. So they had PPE or management by objectives, things like that, that came along. But I don't think that that filtered down to the intramural program very much.

Park: But _____ affect the experimental program in the grants proposal evaluations and sort of guiding the research program into some important areas?

Chen: Well, there may have been a certain amount of that, yeah. There may have been a certain amount of political pressures to do certain things. And certainly, if Congress gave money for NIH to do something in a certain area, NIH had to be responsive. So I don't think that it affected the intramural program that much.

Park: How much... What about the War Against Cancer campaign in the early '70s? It affected NCI greatly, and it became bureau status. It got bureau status. And then afterwards, the Heart Institute got bureau status, and there were some changes in terms of organizations.

Chen: Yeah. I mean, the Cancer Institute had sort of a planning process, and they did try to manage their science a little bit more than other institutes. At

least budgetarily, they would assign things into various compartments. So I guess in that sense, maybe intramural was affected a little more than research, intramural research in other institutes. And there were things that directed it, trying to discover certain things, like, you know, we have a whole Building 41, that was the cancer virus building originally, and it was designed to work only on trying to find the cancer virus. So I suppose the budgetary emphasis on certain diseases or certain areas would result in certain decisions being made with respect to intramural science.

Park: Let me go back to your job at the Office of Program Planning and Evaluation in Building 1. First of all, is that office, was that office created at the time when you came to NIH or...

Chen: Well, I think something like it existed prior to the time I joined the office, and I'm not sure it had exactly the same name, but there was a fellow named Chuck Kidd who did the things that Tom Kennedy then later did. But it might have expanded a little bit when Kennedy came. The functions had to be carried out by somebody, and it might have been under a different name.

Park: I see. Do you remember what kind of jobs you did at the time?

Chen: Yeah. Well, when I was a grants associate, I had been assigned to work with Dr. Marjorie Wilson [sp.], who was an assistant director of Program Planning and Evaluation, and I started a study on bioengineering. The study wasn't quite finished when I came back to work for her as my first job after finishing the program, grants associate program. So we completed

that report called “NIH and Engineering in Biology and Medicine.” Then I worked on the enrollment of physicians in medical schools, because one of the things that NIH was responsible for back then was medical education. It doesn’t do it anymore, but we had something called the Bureau of Health Manpower.

Park: Within NIH?

Chen: Within NIH. And the director of NIH at the time, Robert Marston [sp.], had been the dean of a medical school before he came to NIH. And he was more interested in medical education than he was in research itself, so Marjorie Wilson [sp.] was an expert on medical education, and we worked on programs that would entice medical schools to increase the sizes of their classes. So I worked on that for a couple years.

At the time, there was also an interest in... Well, there was a threat to the training programs at the NIH, and so it was decided to do a big study of training, and I was put on this study as the project officer on a large contract that investigated the training efforts of the medical schools and universities.

Park: Threat from where? Congress?

Chen: Yeah. Well, I don’t know if it was Congress. Somewhere downtown, maybe the Bureau of the Budget.

Park: I see.

Chen: In any case, the NIH felt it was necessary to study and defend its training programs, so I became project officer on that large contract. And that kind

of phased into a couple of other things that I did, one of which was to become the project clearance officer; that is, the office that interfaces with the Bureau of the Budget, or now called the OMB, to get OMB clearance for questionnaires and things that required OMB clearance, so I did that.

Then about this time, there was a law passed that set aside up to 1 percent of appropriations for evaluation. It was called the evaluation set-aside. And the man that they hired to run that program didn't stay very long, and when he left, they asked me to take that job on, so I became head of the Analysis and Evaluation Branch, which was the forerunner of the program today that administers the 1 percent set-aside for the program.

Park: So your jobs at the time had to do with mainly experimental program and the _____ intramural program. Is that correct?

Chen: Well, it was mainly extramural, mainly extramural. But during the time that I was project officer on the training program study, I had to give talks about the study to the various groups, and, of course, the National Institute of General Medical Sciences was one of the prime supporters of extramural training, so I got to know some of the people in that institute. And when the associate director for Program Planning and Evaluation of that institute decided to retire from NIH in 1972, the then-director of that institute, DeWitt Stetten, asked me to join NIGMS as associate director for program planning and information, so that's where I went. And for the next two years, I was really heavily engaged in extramural programs, because NIGMS was essentially all extramural.

Park: Right, right. That is now intramural program.

Chen: Yeah.

Park: And Dr. Stetten was _____ for his support of basic research in all fields of science, not just obviously related to medicine. How did that kind of philosophy influence the NIGMS operation?

Chen: Well, I think he was a great director of NIGMS. He had been scientific director of the Arthritis Institute here. He had been the founding dean of the Rutgers Medical School. He had been co-author of a famous textbook on biochemistry, and he was well known as a wonderful teacher. So I think he really set the stage for NIGMS to become a cornerstone of both basic research support. Of course, they also did support some clinical programs as well.

It was a very broad-based institute, had a huge influence on the underpinnings of many medical school departments.

Park: NIGMS at the time had its own budget from the Congress?

Chen: Yeah.

Park: And each institute...

Chen: Each institute had its own budget. The director of each institute would testify for the budget of that institute.

Park: Did that practice start in the beginning of the, after World War II?

Chen: I'm not sure when. I think it's always been the case that the directors of the institutes would testify, so probably--I don't know if it's ever been otherwise.

Park: And when Dr. Stetten came to Building 1 as a deputy director for science in '74...

Chen: In '74, yeah.

Park: ...you came along.

Chen: I came along.

Park: And it was at the invitation of Dr. Stetten?

Chen: Yes.

Park: And the situation in the second term of the Nixon Administration was a bit dicey, according to _____ Stetten's _____. Could you recall any of the situation at the time at NIH?

Chen: Well, the reason Stetten came back here was that the previous director of NIH, Robert Marston [sp.], was fired by Nixon. When Nixon was reelected, he asked for the resignations of everybody that was a presidential appointee, and, of course, Dr. Marston [sp.] never expected that, with no change in administration, that he would be fired. But Nixon, I think, kind of arbitrarily went down and accepted the resignations of maybe a third or half of the people on the list. So when Dr. Marston [sp.] was fired, it was a big shock to everybody here. Most of his or many of his top staff left at that time, including Dr. Berliner [sp.], who was the deputy director of science.

They brought in a new director named Robert Stone, who had been a medical school dean in New Mexico, who had taken some management courses at MIT, so he had developed some reputation as a manager type of

person and maybe the administration wanted this type of person here. So Stone was scouting around for a deputy director of science to replace Robert Berliner [sp.], and somehow someone mentioned or recommended Dr. Stetten, so he invited Dr. Stetten to come here as deputy director of science. That's the sort of accident that resulted in Stetten coming here and my joining him, because at the time Stetten had--I think his deputy was Leo Venuler [sp.], and Leo stayed as acting director of NIGMS. So it's sort of an accidental thing that I came back here and was affiliated with the intramural program. Otherwise, I probably would have spent my entire career in extramural.

Park: Right, right. And did you find great differences in terms of your work in intramural and extramural?

Chen: Oh, yeah, completely different, because intramural, I worked mainly with the scientific directors, with all the scientists here, got back into the culture that I had been in years and years before.

Park: Right, right. What's the definition of intramural affairs? Do you have any precise job description at the time, or just...

Chen: No. It was primarily to be staffed to Dr. Stetten, so I was sort of the right-hand person to Dr. Stetten. He chaired the scientific directors' meetings twice a month, and I was the executive secretary. I did the agenda and kept the minutes and worked through the scientific directors on all their problems. All the problems they would bring to us, we would try to solve. That's the kind of thing. And lots of papers to sign. Sometimes

I'd tell people that my job description is to sign things I don't write and write things I don't sign.

Park: So you gradually learned how to manage, to solve the problems in the intramural program.

Do you remember specific problems that arose among the scientific directors, say, key problems or...

Chen: Well, there are space problems, try to work out assignments of space. There were all the promotions and personnel actions that came through the scientific directors. We administered programs like the Foreign Work Study Program. We signed retirement papers. All the people that wanted to do things outside of their regular job--they called them outside activity requests--they all came through this office and were approved here. So we got involved in ethical issues, personnel issues. Occasionally there were disputes that had to be adjudicated, complaints of one kind or another; occasional authorship disputes, but usually they could get resolved elsewhere. Later, when we got into scientific misconduct, I became the intramural research integrity officer, so I handled some scientific misconduct inquiries and investigations.

Park: Like the Baltimore case?

Chen: Baltimore. I didn't really do much on that.

Park: I was intrigued by the function of scientific directors in each institute in shaping, actually, the program there by having power on allocating resources, space, budget, and personnel. And could you comment on the

role of scientific directors in running the laboratories? How much power did they have?

Chen: Well, the scientific directors of the institutes generally had a lot of power because they had a budget, usually, that was a substantial budget that came through the institute director. But then they had a lot of power in allocating that budget to the various laboratories and branches. They were able to hire and fire. They had decision-making ability on promotions, on tenure, on generally giving direction to _____. So these were very, very powerful individuals. And, in fact, back then, it was even said that some of the scientific directors were more powerful than the institute directors. That's kind of reversed now. So the institute directors are regarded as the top person in each institute. But back then, the prestige and power sometimes was in the scientific director.

Park: When did that trend shift?

Chen: I think it started to shift under Weingarten [sp.], and then with each succeeding director, it shifted more and more, so Weingarten [sp.], Healey [sp.], and Varmus, the institute directors, became the dominant focal point.

Park: There is often comparison of the people in the intramural program and the people in the universities, say, lab chiefs compare to the department chairs, and scientific directors and the dean of the college. But it seems to me that the scientific directors at the time had more power than the dean might have in the university in terms of allocating resources. Is that correct or...

Chen: It may be correct in the sense that the scientific director controlled the size

of the budget, whereas the deans don't have very much money themselves. The money comes through grants to the faculty. So I think an individual faculty member with a grant had more autonomy than a lab chief here, let's say, or a section head here.

Park: That's right. Is there any cases that, you know, in the universities, if each department has some sort of autonomy in the budget every year or the personnel selection and faculty selections, and they have a faculty meeting and they raise concerns and then they went to the dean asking something, is there any, some sort of cases like that, say, the lab chiefs asking something, and if there is any conflicts of interest among the lab chiefs? I mean, is it--the scientific directors have all the power to silence some party and boost others?

Chen: I think so. The scientific director really has more power in that sense than the dean. At a university, there are oftentimes faculty meetings where the department chairs or the faculty can express themselves, be heard. They don't have anything comparable to that here, although an attempt was made by several, including...

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Chen: ...people to speak out on issues. But they didn't have the--it wasn't a forum where they'd really adjudicate things. It might have been more of an informational exchange forum. So I think that the scientific director really did have pretty much absolute power over things.

Park: It seems to me that when the institutes is growing very fast and everybody

seems to be happy, even though some people may have more budget and space, it's because it's growing, and I do not, you know, that there might be some laboratories in the stage of phasing out but mostly are growing and hiring new people and things like that. And so, I don't know.

Chen: Well, I think that's right. How do you preserve excellence in a no-growth economy? That's one of the things that Stetten used to ask. And he was realizing that the NIH was tapering off in its growth, and how can you maintain excellence under those conditions? How do you weed out the poorer performing entities, and can you maintain other initiatives like diversity or egalitarianism, allowing minorities to participate? How do you maximize this if you want to try to maintain excellence when you're not growing? So that's a big challenge and it's something that NIH struggles with even today. Even though we are, our budget is still going up, there's not enough to satisfy everybody. So somebody is going to benefit more than somebody else, and some people may even suffer a bit or _____. So that's where the quality of the reviews and the science come in, and we try to maximize the use of our resources, but not everybody's going to benefit equally.

Park: That's right. How much outside reviews, like BSC reports, affect the scientific director's decision? Is it always just a...

Chen: I think today it does a lot. I think the BSC reviews have gotten much more rigorous, of better quality, a better type of reviewer. Years ago, I would say that some of the BSCs were not doing as rigorous a job as today. Some

of the members were picked, not for the excellence of their science but because they were friends of some of the directors. But today I think the reviews are increasingly excellent, and Dr. Gottesman [sp.] has _____ in trying to maximize the quality of the reviews and make it a more rigorous, higher quality review. And we monitor them. I just got back from two days in North Carolina, at the NIEHS Board of Scientific Counselors. Someone from our office will monitor each organization. We have it split up among the four of us: myself, Dr. Wyatt [sp.], Dr. Schwartz [sp.], and Dr. Garcia Perez. [sp.]. So we try to attend the recap, the recapitulation sessions usually held between the board chairman and the board with the institute director and with the scientific director. Sometimes we're also there for other parts of the review, and I sat through most of the whole thing down at NIEHS. And many institute directors now sit through the entire reviews of their intramural program, whereas in the older days, they might not have been as faithful in watching all that was going on.

Park: And when did the written reports start?

Chen: Oh, they've been in effect for many, many years. They go back to, I think, the late '50s.

Park: The BSC itself started in 1958, and _____. Did they present their written reports or just orally otherwise...

Chen: I think they had written reports even back then. I'm not sure if we've got copies of all those, but certainly when I came, there were written reports.

Now, some of the institutes may not have been as faithful in having

a review of somebody every four years as we now require. And we noticed, even after Dr. Gottesman [sp.] came, that there were some institutes that had gaps in their reviews. It wasn't every four years. Now it's gotten onto a required cycle that everyone has to be reviewed at least once every four years.

It's almost time now.

Park: It's almost time now, so I'd like to stop here today, and thank you very much.

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