

“Under Ben’s leadership, the SEER program was expanded substantially to cover a quarter of the U.S. population, enhancing this extraordinary national research resource,” said Dr. Brenda Edwards, associate director of the Surveillance Research Program in DCCPS.

Hankey is also interested in the creation of tools for integrating cancer surveillance data into the cancer control planning process. The first attempt at this was the creation of State Cancer Profiles, a web-based database that now resides on NCI’s Cancer Control PLANET site. The State database offers rapid identification of areas at the county level where there are opportunities for cancer control.

In retirement, Hankey continues working on a project with Dr. Rocky Feuer and others that involves the development of a tool that provides more meaningful information on patient prognosis to both clinicians and patients using the SEER database.

“Ben Hankey’s career at NCI has been noteworthy in its integration of statistical methodology and epidemiology,” says Edwards, “culminating in the dissemination of cancer statistics that have informed both scientists and the general public about the nation’s progress in cancer control.”

### *Pioneered Social Science In Dentistry*

#### **NIDCR’s Cohen Retires**

The way Dr. Lois Cohen tells it, it was happenstance that she got her first postdoc position at the PHS Division of Dental Health (DDH). Some colleagues suggested her for a job there and she was quickly recruited. “I figured, why be in Washington if you can’t have access to national problems, national data, and really have a chance to do something significant?”

So the newly minted Ph.D. began her career as a social science analyst in DDH. Over the years, she became a driving force for incorporating social science research into dentistry and expanding interdisciplinary oral health research around the globe. Cohen, who most recently served as director of NIDCR’s Office of International Health, retired June 2 after 42 years of government service—30 of those spent at NIDCR.



“Lois has been instrumental over the years in advancing our institute’s mission domestically and internationally,” said NIDCR director Dr. Lawrence Tabak. “She’s a dedicated and forward-thinking researcher and science administrator whose contributions to the institute and the field of oral health research are numerous and wide-ranging. Lois has been a leader in integrating the application of the social and behavioral sciences into research for the study of oral health, which has ultimately helped improve public health both in the U.S. and around the world.”

Cohen’s early work concentrated on the social, behavioral, cultural and economic factors that influence oral disease development and oral health care delivery. DDH was vibrant and active, she said, but there were challenges. “It was definitely a challenge being a woman in a then male-dominated working environment,” she said. “And also being a non-dentist in a dental world; there were always certain avenues that were blocked. But the very fact that the division leadership sought out social and behavioral scientists to address their issues was an overriding incentive for me.”

While at DDH, she and her colleagues devised strategies to help overcome the public’s reluctance to adopt water fluoridation as well as to encourage use of topical fluorides and dental sealants in private practices. Her initial studies focused on incentives and barriers facing dentists who wanted to adopt techniques for the early detection of oral cancer. Cohen also launched two international studies in collaboration with the World Health Organization that looked at which national delivery models of care resulted in better oral health status.

In 1976, NIDR director Dr. David Scott recruited her to advise on the relationship between dental health and the social and behavioral sciences. As an advisor, and subsequently as director of the Office of Planning, Evaluation and Communications from 1983 to 1989, Cohen incorporated social and behavioral research into the strategic plans for NIDCR and pioneered major evaluations of the institute’s portfolios in caries research, craniofacial anomalies, biomaterials and centers.

In 1989, she was selected to head the institute’s extramural research program, which faced restricted funds and a budget that was stagnant. “It was not unlike today,” she said. “We needed to figure out ways to keep our enterprise strong and to move the science forward during that time.” To circumvent the budget issues, she worked with the extramural program management community to facilitate public-private partnerships that would help leverage the agency’s resources. Those models for collaborative funding continue to guide other agencies as well.

As head of the Office of International Health, Cohen ensured that global health issues were addressed by global oral health research. “Take Noma, or oral gangrene,” she said, discussing a condition prevalent in Africa. “Why do we study it since we have hardly any cases here? Because you have to understand what it is to be able to prevent it. And, as we all know, diseases can cross borders—they don’t respect geopolitical boundaries.” OIH also served as a WHO Collaborating Center for Dental and Craniofacial Research, functioning as a liaison with agencies involved in global oral health research and training both here and abroad.

Cohen has received numerous honors and awards and her alma mater, Purdue University, conferred its first honorary doctorate to a sociologist in 1989 for her work related to dental health research globally. In retirement she says she may return to ceramics as well as explore other crafts, and is looking forward to more time for reading and extra time with friends and family. In general, she says, she hopes to lead a “more balanced existence.”

Although officially retired, Cohen has been asked to stay and consult for NIDCR part-time. “I’m very committed to what we do here,” she says. “What we’re about is so important and I love being a part of it.”