

The  
FOUNDATION  
for the HISTORY of  
WOMEN in MEDICINE



## **The Foundation for the History of Women in Medicine**

### **The Renaissance Woman in Medicine Oral History Project**

**Mary Elizabeth Guinan, PhD, MD**

**Interview Sessions 1 – 2, 17-18 June, 2016**

## **Mary Elizabeth Guinan, PhD, MD**

### **Interview Profile**

Dr. Mary Elizabeth Guinan (b. 1939, Brooklyn, New York) received her PhD in Physiology/Biochemistry from the University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, Texas and her MD from Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. She then began her medical career in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, where she served as a medical epidemiologist and administrator for 24 years. She began at the Epidemic Intelligence Service, working on the containment of disease outbreaks and served in the smallpox eradication program in India. Later at CDC she focused her research on sexually transmitted disease and was part of the Task Force that investigated the first cases of the emerging AIDS epidemic in 1981. She published the first study on AIDS in women in the U.S. She was the first woman to serve as the CDC's Associate Director for Science, the chief scientific advisor to the Director of CDC –the first woman to serve in that role. In 1998 she was appointed the Nevada State Health Officer, again, the first woman to occupy that office. In 2004 she was recruited to the University of Nevada Las Vegas to serve as founding dean of the School of Public Health (since renamed as School of Community Health Sciences). Dr Guinan retired from UNLV in 2014 and is now Professor Emerita. At that time she began writing her first book about her CDC career entitled “Adventures of a Female Medical Detective” (published in 2016). She was awarded the Alma Dea Morani Renaissance Woman in Medicine Award in 2006.

The interview of approximately five hours in duration was conducted June 17<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016 in Reno, Nevada. Tacey A. Rosolowski, PhD conducts the interview.

# Mary Elizabeth Guinan, PhD, MD

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## Chapter Summaries

### Session 1-A: 17 June 2016

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#### **Chapter One: *A Career Focus on STDs Arises from a Media Error***[00:01:43]; p. 9

Inspirations [00:03:34]

situation for women [00:06:26], [00:18:57]

Dr. Guinan begins this chapter by sharing her reasons for writing her recently published memoir, *Adventures of a Female Medical Detective In Pursuit of Smallpox and AIDS* (2016, Johns Hopkins University Press). She then sketches the evolution of her research interests, noting that she decided to focus on women in 1975/'76, while on a fellowship at the University of Utah. She then explains that her work on oral herpes attracted the attention of the media, whose members mistakenly reported that she was working on genital herpes. She goes on to explain how this mistake channeled her into eventually focusing her work exclusively on STDs, where very little data existed on women. She notes that one of her studies was accepted in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and made her “famous overnight.”

#### **Chapter Two: *Immigrant Parents Committed to Education***

[00:26:31]+, p. 25

Women [00:37:14], [00:39:50]

Dr. Guinan sketches her family background, explaining that her parents emigrated from Ireland in 1928, a move she admires as courageous. She describes her father's job and talks about her mother's character and the messages she sent to all five children (Dr. Guinan is the middle child) that they would go to college.

#### **Chapter Three: *A Good Student Has Trouble Finding Work as a Chemist***

[00:00:00] (Begins file #2), p. 36

\* Sexism [00:00:15], [00:09:32], [00:12:00], [00:13:24]

\* Situation for women [00:04:18], [00:07:03]

\* Mentoring [00:04:18]

Dr. Guinan sketches her educational background, noting that she attended an all-girls Catholic High School and applied to Hunter College, which was geared for children of immigrants, because of cost. She talks about classes she enjoyed and explains that she did really well in chemistry.

In college, she explains, there were mostly women in her chemistry classes. She compares the impact of same sex vs. coed classes on women.

After receiving her BA in Chemistry (1961), she had a lot of difficulty finding a job as a women in that field. She talks about her first job working as a flavor chemist and the discovery that men were being paid more.

#### **Chapter Four: *A PhD Program and Frustrated Dreams of Becoming an Astronaut***

[00:13:12], p. 48

- \* Sexism [00:20:33], [00:23:41], [00:25:13]
- \* Inspiring Story [00:15:45]
- \* Mentoring [00:18:39]
- \* Situation for women [00:25:43]

Dr. Guinan next talks about her decision to pursue a PhD and the challenges she faced, beginning with her discovery that many programs either didn't accept women or didn't provide financial support for them.

Next she recalls being inspired by John F. Kennedy's "ask not" speech, which motivated her to go into a field where she could be of service, eventually inspiring her to become an astronaut. She talks about the period of the Cold War and the availability of money to support graduate degrees. She explains that she found support at a PhD program in Physiology at the University of Texas Medical Branch (Galveston, Texas), where she took courses with medical students and often attended lectures by astronauts. She conducted research into blood coagulation under her mentor, Dr. Mason Guest. She took flying lessons and eventually passed all the physical tests required to qualify for the astronaut program, but was not asked to apply for the program because she was a woman.

#### **Chapter Five: *Views on Marriage and Family and Johns Hopkins for Medical School***

[00:25:13]; p. 55

- \* Inspiring stories [00:31:41], [00:34:53]

Dr. Guinan first talks about her attitudes toward marriage and family and how she saw her future in personal terms. She notes her postdoctoral fellowship at the National Institutes of Health at the Heart and Lung and Blood Institute, then talks about why she ended up going to Johns Hopkins for Medical School. She talks about two women connected with that institution, Mary Elizabeth Garrett and Gertrude Stein.

**Session 1-B: Afternoon Session, 17 June 2016**

**Chapter Six: *Joining the CDC's Epidemic Intelligence Service***

[00:00:00 -- File 3], p. 65

- \* Situation for women [00:06:13], [00:06:59]
- \* Sexism [00:08:38]
- \* Inspirations [00:01:25], [00:02:52]

Dr. Guinan begins this chapter by explaining that when she began her medical training (Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions, Baltimore, Maryland), she assumed she would continue in academic medicine and study hematology. However, she was doing her residency (Internal Medicine, Hershey Medical Center, Pennsylvania State University) when students at Kent State University were killed by National Guard (4 May 1970), and this event had a great impact on her. Dr. Guinan wanted to do something for her country. She read about the ongoing smallpox eradication program and decided to join the CDC's Epidemic Intelligence Service, which was in charge of that program.

Dr. Guinan notes that she was the only woman among thirty-nine physicians. She describes how she made herself inconspicuous in a "system that was against you" and in which women were not considered career people.

**Chapter Seven: *Working at the Epidemic Intelligence Service and a First Success as a Field Officer***

[00:11:37], p. 72

- \* Inspiring Story [00:11:37], [00:16:44] and this entire narrative covers a great success, [00:28:32]
- \* Sexism [00:14:06], [00:16:44] - [00:18:58]

After sketching the EIS's one-month training program and her role once beginning work in August of 1974, Dr. Guinan tells the story of how she handled an outbreak of pseudomonas at a military hospital –the first time the military had ever asked the CDC for assistance.

She describes attitudes the military showed toward her and how she worked around them to successfully deal with the outbreak. She notes the main lesson she learned from this experience: "I could do it."

**Chapter Eight: *The Smallpox Eradication Program in Uttar Pradesh***

[00:00:00 – File 4], p. 84

\* Learning on the job [00:00:00], [00:05:16]

\* Inspiring story, success [00:09:39], [00:17:04]

In this chapter, Dr. Guinan goes into detail about her work on the smallpox eradication program (1974 – 1975). She explains that the CDC was using a new strategy of search and containment, rather than mass vaccination. She then describes how she and her team worked in India for four to five months, after which India was declared free of smallpox. “Imagine being part of this,” she says, and affirms that this was a “life changing experience.”

Next, Dr. Guinan discusses the current debate over what should be done with the remaining strains of smallpox that are under the control of Russia and the US. Dr. Guinan rejects the argument that smallpox can be effectively used for bioterrorism, and supports keeping strains.

Next she notes that she was one of a very few women who went into the field on CDC initiatives in the seventies. She tells a story about being offered an elephant to facilitate her travels around Uttar Pradesh, then talks about the culture shock she experienced in India.

**Chapter Nine: *Recruited to the CDC’s STD Division and Work on AIDS***  
[00:28:35], p. 105

In this chapter, Dr. Guinan sketches the beginnings of her work on sexually transmitted diseases. (She notes that she had already come to be known as “Dr. Herpes.”) She explains that the CDC recruited her to the STD Division in 1978. She talks about conducting the first case control study of gay men with and without AIDS, documenting that the disease was sexually transmitted.

Next, Dr. Guinan offers current statistics on AIDS, treatments available, and the WHO’s goal of eradicating the disease by 2030.

**Chapter Ten: *Admiration for Nobel Prize Winner, Françoise Barré-Sinoussi***  
[00:40:29], p. 115

\* Inspiring story –this whole section is about an inspiring woman  
\* Situation for women [00:40:29], [00:44:32]

Dr. Guinan begins this chapter by explaining how difficult it was to identify the AIDS virus as it was constantly mutating. She then talks about the work of Françoise Barré-Sinoussi, who performed some of the fundamental work in the identification of the HIV virus as the cause of AIDS. (Dr. Guinan interviewed Dr. Barré-Sinoussi in 2012.) Dr. Guinan sketches Dr. Barré-Sinoussi’s research and activist contributions to the AIDS movement, including her open letter to Pope Benedict.

**Chapter Eleven: *A Team Focus at the CDC and Programs Directed at AIDS***

[00:00:00 --File 5]; p. 123

\* Leadership (collaborative) [00:02:26]

Dr. Guinan first talks about the culture of team work at the CDC. She then explains the importance of the MMWR (the CDC's newsletter, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report) and describes how she was able to get the first report on five cases of a new virus (AIDS) into the newsletter in June of 1981.

Dr. Guinan explained how the STD Division was alerted that “something terrible was going on.” She talks about cultural attitudes toward the disease and the difficulties funding work on AIDS after budget cuts during the Reagan administration. She tells stories of working seeing AIDS patients while working in clinic one day a week. She empathetically describes these patient’s “terrible physical and social condition” where there was no treatment –a situation that “went on for fourteen years.” She explains the importance of AIDS activists and the impact of the drug cocktails that became available in 1995.

**Chapter Twelve: *Self-Confidence, Attitudes Toward STD Physicians, and the Enduring Pain of AIDS***

[00:14:09], p. 132

\* Situation for women [00:18:06]

\* Inspiring stories [00:25:06], [00:27:43]

\* Experiences of women – self-confidence

Dr. Guinan begins this chapter sharing her own reactions to patients experiencing STDs. She provides a portrait of attitudes surrounding STDs at the time: she talks about assumptions that MDs who worked on STDs couldn’t get work in any other specialty. She talks about attitudes about AIDS patients and the impact Princess Diana had when she held an AIDS child.

Dr. Guinan notes that she published the first article on AIDS in women (and discusses assumptions about women and AIDS at the time). She observes how many women contributed to making changes that have led to improvements in AIDS.

**Chapter Thirteen: *On Feminism, Religion, and the Desire to Serve the Public***

[00:30:34], p. 143

In this chapter, Dr. Guinan talks about becoming a feminist then discusses her views on religion. She notes that her mother was very devout and stressed the importance of doing public service, a message that Dr. Guinan embraced from an early age.

[The recorder is paused.]

**Chapter Fourteen: *Promotions at the CDC and Creating Functional Teams as Director of AIDS Evaluation***

[00:36:16], p. 147

- \* Leadership [00:43:19], [00:46:39], [00:48:07], [00:49:33], [00:57:20], [00:58:38]
- \* Situation for women [01:01:26]

In this chapter, Dr. Guinan talks about roles she serves after being promoted (1986 - 1990) out of the STD Division at the CDC. She was first promoted to Associate Director for Science –the first woman to serve that role. She explains how this came about because the head of the CDC is a political appointee. In this role she was the chief scientific advisor to the head of the CDC.

Next, she talks about her role as Deputy Director of AIDS Evaluation (1990 – 1995), focusing on work in behavioral sciences. She notes that, at the time, there was little respect for behavioral sciences research and researchers, and part of her role was to develop a respectful team culture. She describes creating the first working group focused on the behavioral sciences CDC. The group included behavioral theorists, sociologists and economists. She talks about the goals the group set, how they achieved them, and how she built a respectful culture.

**Interview Session 2: 18 June 2016**

**Interview Identifier**

[00:00:00 –File 6], p. 167

**Chapter Fifteen: *Politics and a New Role as Director of Urban Research Centers***

[00:00:18], p. 168

- \* Leadership [00:00:27]

Dr. Guinan begins this chapter by explaining that she was forced to transition out of work on AIDS because of a political shift in administration. This was a real shock, she notes, and forced her to realize that she was not indispensable, no matter how good her work might be.

She then explains how she became Director of Urban Research Centers (1995 – 1998). She explains her role of increasing the level of research and prevention in communities. She notes that she was also going through a divorce at this time and it was time to think about changing careers.

**Chapter Sixteen: *Leaving the CDC and a New Role as Nevada State Health Officer***

[00:07:47], p. 174

- \* Leadership

\* Mentoring [training] [00:08:32], [00:11:40]

Dr. Guinan discusses her work as Nevada State Health Officer (1998-2002). She begins by talking about her love of Nevada and explains that the state's low population makes it easier to get things done in government. She talks about the role of State Health Officers and talks about her own learning curve as she settled into the role.

Dr. Guinan notes that she took part in the State Health Leadership Initiative (1998 – 1999), a training program for new state health officials, offered through the Harvard University Kennedy School of Government and Robert Wood Johnson. One of the most important lessons she learned, she explains, is that she is an “introvert in an extrovert job.”

**Chapter Seventeen: *A Nevada Water Fluoridation Initiative***  
[00:14:11], p. 180

\* Leadership [00:14:14]+, [00:23:31], [00:23:52]+, [00:25:59]

In this chapter, Dr. Guinan talks about her first major initiative as Nevada State Health Officer: developing a successful legislative bill to fluoridate the Nevada water supply. She talks about why this was needed, the opposition she encountered, and what she learned about creating strategies to promote health initiatives while in political office.

Dr. Guinan also notes that this project demonstrated that a state health officer has a “tremendous responsibility” and must operate in a very complicated system. She also learned how to take care of herself as an introvert in a demanding extrovert job and how she had to “move beyond failure.”

**Chapter Eighteen: *Recruited to Start a School of Public Health at University of Nevada-Las Vegas***  
[00:26:00], p. 188

\* Leadership [00:29:42], [00:31:24]

Dr. Guinan begins this chapter by explaining why she was recruited to start a School of Public Health at University of Nevada-Las Vegas. She explains the need for the school in Nevada and notes her own reluctance to serve such an administrative role in academia. She sketches her vision and strategy for developing the school.

[The recorder is paused.]

Dr. Guinan explains that PhDs are often suspicious of MDs and there was some suspicion about an MD heading a school of public health.

**Chapter Nineteen: *The Practicalities of Starting a School; Committed to Minority Representation***

[00:33:17], p. 194

\* Leadership: this entire chapter provides practical demonstration of Dr. Guinan's leadership approaches.

In this chapter, Dr. Guinan sketches some of the process she went through setting up the School of Public Health, noting the learning curve she was on. She notes that Shawn Gerstenberger was really a co-founder throughout this process.

Dr. Guinan also notes that she is proud of the minority faculty they have recruited and the school's focus on minority health. She explains that the NIH awarded **Michelle Chino** a \$1.3 million grant for minority health, the first competitive grant that the University of Nevada-Las Vegas received from the NIH. She explains some of the work with minority health that is underway. Dr. Guinan explains that her aim is to move to evidence-based decision making and wants all research to solve Nevada problems.

Next Dr. Guinan talks about challenges the school has faced. She notes that the name had to be changed because the school is not an accredited institution of public health: The School of Community Health Sciences. She discusses establishing an undergraduate program. She talks about working with Richard Whitley in the State Health Department.

**Chapter Twenty: *A Hepatitis-C Outbreak and a Return to State Health Officer***

[00:15:01], p. 208

\* Leadership (Example of team action) [00:23:35]

In this chapter, Dr. Guinan explains that when Nevada had an outbreak of hepatitis-C in 2008 (the largest ever in the U.S.), she was asked by the State to go back to serving as State Health Officer. She explains how she agreed to a half-time position and reduced her work as Dean to half time.

She explains how she and Richard Gerstenberger worked to address the outbreak, giving Dr. Gerstenberger great credit for his ability to analyze systems to improve them. She notes that the CDC came in to help with tracking the hepatitis-C cases.

**Chapter Twenty One: *Reflections on Teamwork, Success and Failure, Evidence-Based Decisions, and Advice to Young Women Professionals***

[00:24:42], p. 216

\* Leadership [00:24:42], [00:27:24], [00:30:47], [00:31:41], [00:33:57]

\* Advice [00:27:50]

Stressing the importance of teamwork, Dr. Guinan begins this chapter by affirming that she wants to work with people who know things she doesn't know. She then offers advice to young women who would like to work in public health, emphasizing the importance of understanding that a system of public health exists and that collaboration is important in every state. She also says, "You're going to fail," and it's important to know how to cope with that as well as the knowledge that no one is indispensable.

She talks about the value of working in a small state where it's possible to make personal connections; it's also important, she says, to understand the political system and not take sides.

Her most important rule: when data is lacking and emotions run high, it's important to base decisions on evidence.

Dr. Guinan speculates that her birth order as a middle child may have fostered her ability to collaborate and remain non-partisan.

**Chapter Twenty Two: *Gratified to Be a Mentor for Public Health Students and Professionals; The Alma Dea Morani Award***

[00:35:12], p. 223

\* Leadership [00:36:04], [00:41:58]

\* Mentoring [00:37:30]

\* FHWIM [00:42:10]

Dr. Guinan begins this chapter by noting that she retired in 2014 and taught part-time at the School. She tells a revealing anecdote about mentoring a student, Annie Wyman, who worked as a massage therapist and who had an innovative idea for a research project. Dr. Wyman received her PhD based on this qualitative study.

Dr. Guinan then talks about how appreciate she is to have received the Alma Dea Morani Award. She comments on the value of documenting the experiences of the award winners with the oral history project.

**Epilogue One: *Grand Marshal of the Gay Pride Parade, 2009***

[00:00:00 –File 7], p. 232

\* Leadership

Dr. Guinan tells the story of serving as Grand Marshal of the Gay Pride Parade in 2009, while she was still serving as State Health Officer. She describes the dramatic event, which involved driving through Reno in a convertible. She tells about attending the festival and having people

thank her. She says she was very proud to be asked to participate and it enabled her to communicate that as State Health Officer she was concerned and supportive of the community.

**Epilogue Two: *Supporting Gay Rights***

[00:04:48], p. 237

Dr. Guinan talks about supporting the gay rights movement in Nevada. She was asked to help support a concert where Janis Ian was to appear. Though she didn't provide extensive support, the organizers put up a huge banner thanking her. She was glad to have the opportunity to support the community. She talks about the unforgettable experience of working with a disparaged group, such as AIDS patients in the early years. She talks about how important it is to learn