

David Rockefeller, Jr.
Remarks at Prince Mahidol Award Conference
Bangkok, Thailand
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Your Royal Highness... Excellencies... honored guests... thank you for the opportunity to join you today. Congratulations to this year's two Prince Mahidol award winners, Sir Michael David Rawlins, the founding Chairman of NICE, for his achievements in the field of medicine, and Dr. Uche Veronica Amazigo, former director of WHO, for her award in the field of public health.

It was a century ago, in 1913, that my great-grandfather established the Rockefeller Foundation and charged it with its bold mission "to promote the well-being of mankind throughout the world." And given that we have an excuse to celebrate our successes just a bit on this, our 100th anniversary, I hope that you will allow me to share a few reflections on our history—particularly in the field of health and in the Kingdom of Thailand, a nation with which we have enjoyed a special relationship since 1915.

Back then, of course, the world was very different. A mosquito bite could quickly become a death sentence. The year my father was born, in 1915, an American infant would be lucky to someday celebrate a 55th birthday.

Needless to say, there was a great deal of human well-being to promote

So in 1913—the very first year of its existence—the Rockefeller Foundation made its first contact with the royal court of Siam.

The cause for this correspondence was small—only about 1 centimeter long to be precise—a parasite called hookworm. And the Rockefeller Foundation's first major initiative led to its eradication in the United States.

Not long after that initiative commenced, a foundation official, Wickliffe Rose, was curious whether Thailand had experienced hookworm outbreaks, and whether there was anything the foundation could do to help. And in his letter he explained that a grassroots public health campaign to end hookworm would lay the groundwork for improved sanitation and hygiene, and prepare Thailand to fight still more threatening diseases, like malaria.

There were challenges, to be sure. But Thai leaders, together with Rockefeller Foundation experts, persevered. They experimented. They made friends and allies—mobilizing a massive operation that reached from the royal court to the countryside. In a single year, the program treated nearly 350,000 people for intestinal parasites, and installed over 83,000 latrines.

The success of the hookworm campaign directly led to improved urban and rural sanitation. It led to the establishment, in 1918, of a Thai Department of Public Health.

And with the invaluable aid of Prince Mahidol—a close friend of the foundation whom we honor today with this conference—Thai officials supported by Rockefeller overhauled public health in this kingdom. They developed a medical curriculum, trained nurses at Siriraj Hospital and funded scholarships for medical study overseas.

In the words of Dr. A.G Ellis, then the Dean of Siriraj Medical School, *“H.R.H Prince Mahidol was born to make the world a better place.”* I would say that the same is true of Her Royal Highness and the rest of the royal family, whose contributions and commitment to global health have improved millions of lives.

So, from the beginnings of Wycliffe Rose’s initial inquiry came a productive, mutually beneficial partnership between the Rockefeller Foundation and Thailand—a partnership that has flourished for a full century.

Today, Thailand is a leader in medical delivery, education, and research. Thailand also has defied the common belief that Universal Health Coverage is reserved for richer countries, and for the past decade has provided accessible and affordable healthcare to 98 percent of its citizens.

We are proud of our enduring partnership and friendship with the people of Thailand. You see, from Thailand to Tanzania, spanning world wars and global crises, the Rockefeller Foundation has continually sought to make the world a more equitable and resilient place. And over the past one hundred years, the skill and dedication of Rockefeller’s researchers and partners have led to incredible breakthroughs that accomplished just that.

Working flexibly, fearlessly and creatively across countries and disciplines, we helped establish the discipline of public health, and developed a Nobel Prize-winning vaccine for yellow fever.

With hundreds of thousands of people starving in developing countries, the Rockefeller Foundation sparked the Green Revolution in agriculture that saved one billion lives in Asia and Latin America. Here too, partnerships with Thai researchers saw major breakthroughs in areas such as rice biotechnology—a second green revolution—benefitting farmers not just inside Thailand, but across the region.

That spirit of inquiry and innovation—that commitment to collaboration for the betterment of all—has defined the Rockefeller Foundation from the beginning. And it is that spirit, alive and well in Thailand today, which we call upon as we champion a unified, “One Health” approach to infectious diseases.

Because while we may have dealt with hookworm and yellow fever, pandemics remain perhaps the deadliest threat in a globalized world my great-grandfather could hardly have imagined.

Simply put, in a world of diseases without borders, we require disease detection without borders.

That is why, for more than a decade, the development of the groundbreaking Mekong Basin Disease Surveillance Network has been an important priority for the Rockefeller Foundation. Linking the Ministries of Health in six countries, the network facilitates research, information sharing, disease monitoring and response efforts throughout Southeast Asia, allowing public health officials to move as rapidly and flexibly as SARS or H1N1.

In 2005, the MBDS Network successfully investigated and contained a dengue fever outbreak between Thailand and Lao PDR. Two years later, they likewise caught an avian flu outbreak between Thailand and Lao PDR and dealt with the aftermath of regional disasters like Cyclone Nargis. As a testament to its enduring commitment to jointly fight disease outbreaks, this Tuesday the MBDS Network celebrated its official recognition as the MBDS Foundation.

The Foundation also is proud to support the global network Connecting Organizations for Regional Disease Surveillance, or CORDS, which was officially launched here Tuesday.

Made up of six founding regional disease surveillance network members—two in Asia, two in Africa, one in Eastern Europe and one in the Middle East—CORDS complements the work of the leading global human, animal and food health organizations, and enhances the ability of all the network members to improve global surveillance.

With the launch of both the MBDS Network and CORDS, we continue to refine our approach, even as we expand our efforts to other regions, and work with the Asian Development Bank, WHO, and USAID to integrate our One Health strategies into their models.

Together, we are once again proving the power of original thinking, close collaboration across disciplines and borders, and a determined commitment to solutions.

Which brings me back to the beginning.

You see, after that first letter asking about hookworm, the Rockefeller representative in Thailand, Dr. Victor Heiser, received an audience with King Rama VI of the Court of Siam. It was a great honor—the first audience granted to any American—and they proceeded to discuss the success of the hookworm campaign in the U.S. and its potential benefits in Thailand.

King Rama VI, apparently, was impressed. Afterwards, he gave the Rockefeller official a medal, honoring him as a member “Fourth Class of the Order of the White Elephant, Busanabaran.” And he said, “I give you this in confirmation of my promise to support the work of the Rockefeller Foundation in Siam.”

Today, Thailand is a dramatically different place—a country that has set the pace for economic and social progress around the world.

This conference is but one illustration of how Thailand has become a leader in public health, and a true development partner with expertise and experiences to share. And so, as we seek together to understand and address the increasingly complex challenges of the 21st century, the Rockefeller Foundation will proudly continue to partner with the enormous range of innovative and committed institutions in this country.

Over the past hundred years, we have traveled further than my great-grandfather could have dreamed—and I know that our best achievements are ahead of us yet.

Thank you.

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