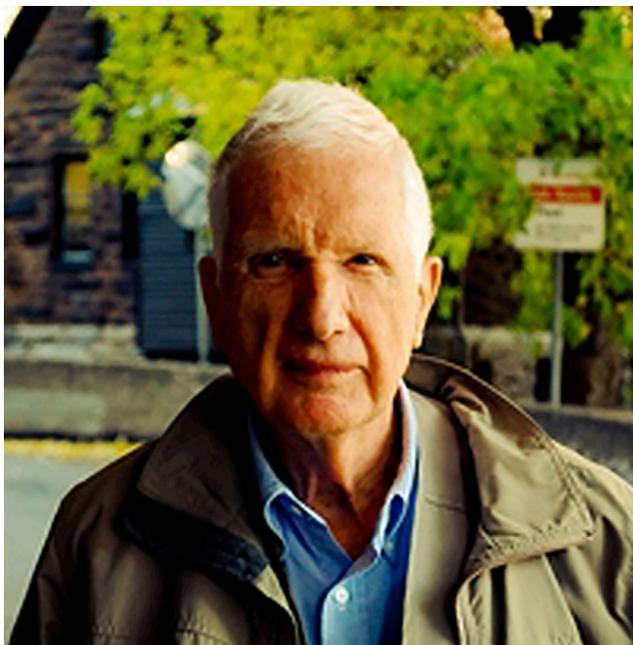


2015 Victor A. McKusick Leadership Award<sup>1</sup>

Charles R. Scriver\*



Let me begin by expressing my thanks to The American Society of Human Genetics (ASHG) for the recognition it is giving with the McKusick Award. Thanks also to David Valle for his very kind words of introduction and also to Neil Risch for the way he managed to astonish me with the news.

Previous recipients of the McKusick Award have set the bar very high, and I am surprised to be joining them. This is a good moment for me to thank those in charge of the nominations and selection of candidates. It is also a good moment to suggest that the ASHG is perhaps wrong in honoring only me for the award this year because what is being recognized is in fact the opportunities that by chance came my way. Indeed, the colleagues who translated opportunities into data, discoveries, and services are ultimately honored here.

Thanks also to the man from Maine, Victor McKusick, whose style, energy, wisdom, and advice have influenced so many of us. Victor had a memorable way of saying things and of getting things done, and he would certainly have something to say about my speaking to you from Australia under bizarre technical conditions. I can hear

Victor saying, “If I had to go to *theyre*, I would not start from *heyah*.”

Recognition is precious, and it is received accordingly. The ASHG is recognizing me, but in fact, with this award, it is recognizing many, many persons and a team of good people who I will not name individually here so as to avoid errors of omission. My colleagues are identifiable in many other ways, for example, as co-authors of publications and as participants in programs of service and in initiatives in education. Indeed, we cooperated, making the whole more than the sum of its parts and letting cooperation be seen as a successful feature of human evolution. This is my opportunity to express my personal admiration and affection for all those colleagues. In the words of Thomas Merton, they have been “shining like the sun” and are recognized here accordingly.

And then there is the family! It has been and remains an inspiration. The words are brief; the feeling is huge.

Chance and opportunity, where and when, have played important roles in my life. For example, in 1962, my wife and I were traveling in our Volkswagen Beetle when an impatient driver tried to pass us on the two-lane highway. Unfortunately, there was oncoming traffic in the other lane. The impatient person smashed into us while trying to avoid a head-on collision. Our car veered, and in a fortunate break in the traffic, we rolled (yes, rolled!) through a gap in the oncoming lane of cars. Believing we were about to die, I called out to my wife, “It has been great!” We did survive, and the continuing gift of life has been and continues to be acknowledged in every breath.

Where chance and opportunity played their important roles in my life and *when* they did are relevant facts. For example, I have worked all my academic life at the Montreal Children’s Hospital under the McGill University umbrella in Quebec, Canada. These proved to be enlightened environments. When they played their roles was also important. In the 1950s, Quebec was experiencing the Quiet Revolution, which transformed Quebec society; and while that was happening, the role of the DNA molecule in biology was being recognized. The incidental development of chromatography as a new technology, and its contribution to the discovery of inborn errors of metabolism, for example, greatly influenced me personally. I was participating as a fledgling clinician-scientist in what is now called translational science. I found it could serve scientific inquiry, medical services, and the health of society as a whole.

<sup>1</sup>This article is based on the address given by the author at the meeting of The American Society of Human Genetics (ASHG) on October 9, 2015, in Baltimore, MD, USA. The audio of the original address can be found at the ASHG website.

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The character of society is revealed in how we treat our weaker members, such as children, the aged, the disabled, and the chronically ill. Perhaps at some other time, I could describe how my own experiences illustrate a relatively humane society in progress. You would discover why it has been possible for me to work with all of those colleagues in this place called the Montreal Children's Hospital at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

I have always enjoyed literature and poetry. I love this poem by the Russian author Osip Mandelstam; it was composed in 1909. It is a metaphor for the genetics of life itself:

What shall I do with the body I have been given  
So much at one with me, so much my own?

For the calm happiness of breathing, being able  
To be alive, tell me where I should be grateful.

I am gardener, flower too, and un-alone  
In this vast dungeon.

My breath, my glow, you can already see  
On the windowpanes of eternity.

A pattern is imprinted there  
Unknown 'til now.

Let this muddle die down, this sediment flow out  
The lovely pattern cannot be crossed out.

And then there is this wonderfully honest brief comment by W.S. Merwin, the American poet, who at age 84 wrote, "I have with me all that I do not know / I have lost none of it."

Thank you again for the recognition and for this opportunity to share a thought or two.