

## International Health Leader William Bicknell Dies

SPH prof remembered as caring for the “underserved and vulnerable”

By Michael S. Saunders and Lisa Chedekel  
WILLIAM J. BICKNELL was an outspoken, inspirational international health practitioner and advocate who sought to “make people hurt less.”

He was the founder and chair emeritus of the BU School of Public Health department of international health, which he helped build into a globally recognized leader. He held a dual appointment at the School of Medicine as a professor and director of international health programs in the department of family medicine.

Bicknell died on June 5, 2012, after a long battle with cancer. He was 75.

During a varied career that spanned five decades and merged practice and policy, Bicknell held posts as the first medical director of the Job Corps, Massachusetts commissioner of public health, acting director of the Neighborhood Health Center Program for the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity, and medical director of health and retirement funds for the United Mine Workers of America.

SPH Dean Robert Meenan (MED’72, GSM’89) says Bicknell was an essential part of the School of Public Health almost from its beginning and a fundamental force in the expanded presence of international health at the University.

“Global health is now a major focus of Boston University and none of that would have been true without Bill Bicknell,” Meenan says. “The mission of the school is to prioritize the disadvantaged, underserved, and vulnerable, and Bill has embodied that mission in his life’s work.”

In the months after his diagnosis, Bicknell detailed his fight with metastatic lung cancer with methodical precision in blog updates and in a poignant final lecture he gave in May at the BU Medical Campus. Titled *Lessons Learned from a Life in Public Health*, the lecture was a no-holds-barred personal recap of his efforts to advance

public health in 62 countries.

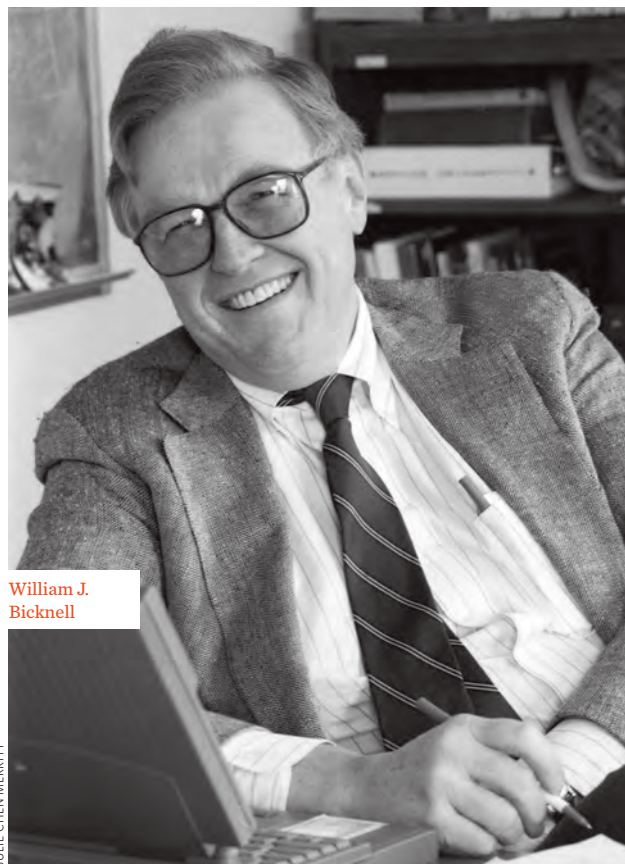
In many ways, the lecture was a reflection of the man who gave it: blunt but caring, profane yet profound. Rapid-fire observations delivered with clinical detachment were followed by touching anecdotes about Bicknell’s main career goal: making health services work better for the poor and other difficult-to-serve populations.

Brian Jack, a MED associate professor of family medicine and vice chair for academic affairs, says Bicknell devoted the last years of his life to strengthening the work of the Lesotho-Boston Health Alliance, which he and Bicknell founded a decade ago. The goal of the alliance is to improve Lesotho’s medical capacity by strengthening hospitals and establishing a family medicine residency program to help the impoverished African country retain physicians.

Bicknell was known for telling his students and colleagues that the first step in approaching public health—at home or abroad—was simply to listen.

Kate Mitchell (SPH’09), one of Bicknell’s students and later one of his teaching assistants, says that Bicknell began each semester with his unique definition of public health: “The art and science of deciding who dies, when, and with what degree of misery.”

But, Mitchell recalls, he also said public health could be defined as “the art and science of deciding who lives a longer, less miserable, happier life.” And his warning to students: “If you approach your work with the second definition, you often forget the consequences of what happens when you fail. Always keep the first definition in mind.”



William J. Bicknell

JULIE CHEN MERRITT

After graduating from Duke University School of Medicine in 1963, Bicknell joined the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps and was named senior physician for Peace Corps volunteers in Ethiopia. While there, he also worked in local hospitals and was exposed to a level of illness and suffering that presaged his shift to public health.

“It was a social and intellectual and emotional change for me,” Bicknell recalled in an April 2012 interview. “It totally hooked me on making services work for people, on improving health care systems.”

After returning from Ethiopia, Bicknell earned a master’s degree in public health from the University of California, Berkeley. During his last lecture, he estimated that he had spent about half of his career working to further public health in the United States and the other half overseas—a balance that “felt just right.”

After coming to BU in 1978, he focused on establishing the curriculum for the nascent international health department and later established the Center for International Health, which was eventually expanded into the Center for Global Health & Development.