

University of Kentucky Alumni Association

# KENTUCKY

Alumni

SPRING 2017



**Dr. Ardis Hoven:**  
Advancing health policy  
on a worldwide stage

# ARDIS HOVEN:

## *Advancing health policy on a worldwide stage*

By Robin Roenker

As the current and first-ever female chair of the World Medical Association (WMA), Dr. Ardis Hoven '66 AS, '70 MED has made a career as a trailblazing physician.

She was the first female president of the Kentucky Medical Association (1993-1994), a former president of the American Medical Association (2013-2014) and one of only five women to graduate in the University of Kentucky College of Medicine Class of 1970.

As an infectious disease physician, she was on the front lines of treating the AIDS epidemic as it first began making waves in Lexington in the late 1970s and early 1980s — heartbreaking work that spurred her eventual career as an internationally-renowned health policy advocate.

Now retired from her 25-year career in private practice at the Lexington Clinic and from her roles as a faculty member within the UK College of Medicine Division of Infectious Diseases and as medical director of the Bluegrass Care Clinic, Hoven isn't slowing down.

Between international trips to advance WMA support of accessible, quality health care for everyone, Hoven also currently works as an infectious disease consultant with the Kentucky Department for Public Health in Frankfort. As such, she's on a mission to help tackle two health care epidemics here at home: opioid addiction and the rise of hepatitis C.

Looking back on her illustrious career, Hoven says breaking gender barriers in medicine was never a conscious, motivating factor for her. She also never foresaw rising to the highest levels of medical association leadership — certainly not on a national or international level — as she has.

"No, I didn't think about it," Hoven said, when asked whether she considered herself a trailblazer for

women in medicine. "I had such tunnel vision. I just wanted to graduate and get into medical school. On the first day of medical school, the professor said, 'Look around you. Some of you will not be here next year.' Everyone in the room could feel the tension. And you think, 'Golly. This is not going to be easy.' So every day, I was just so focused," said Hoven, a 2015 inductee into the UK Alumni Association Hall of Distinguished Alumni.

It was that focus — and a commitment to caring for patients — that led to Hoven's unexpected career as a health policy advocate, she said. "I never imagined this. Was my goal to someday wake up and be president of the American Medical Association? Never. Things evolved. They just happened. I think you start moving along a pathway, and doors open and you say, 'Hey, I might like to try that,'" she said. "And for me, that's what happened along the way."

### FINDING HER PATH

Hoven moved with her family from Cincinnati to Lexington at the age of seven when her father, the Rev. Ard Hoven, accepted a job as the minister at Lexington's Broadway Christian Church. Early on, she knew she wanted to become a doctor; her female pediatrician in Cincinnati had been an early role model.

When it came time to decide on a college, her father gave her some sound advice, which made nearby UK the obvious choice. "My father told me I really needed to go to a big university, preferably one with a medical school," Hoven said, "because he felt that I needed to be able to make it in that environment if I was going to make it into medical school. He was right. It all worked out."

At UK, Hoven was a member of Alpha Delta Pi sorority and was involved in leadership roles on campus.

*"It didn't take me long to figure out that I was as well or better trained than my peers. UK gave me an amazing springboard."*

— Dr. Ardis Hoven



But she admits she spent more time in the library than out. “I was focused. I was studying. I wasn’t a party girl,” she said. Still, Hoven found time while at school to attend every UK home basketball game with her father. Today, she and her husband Ron Sanders ’61 EN, ’63 ’69 ’71 BE, a retired economics professor, continue to enjoy attending UK games.

Her expertise stemming from her undergraduate degree in microbiology led to her specialization in infectious disease during her residency and fellowship at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill after earning her medical degree from UK. While she was initially intimidated at Chapel Hill by peers who had come from elite medical schools such as Princeton, Harvard or Stanford, Hoven quickly realized her UK training matched theirs. Some of this was due to role models who influenced her early at UK, such as Dr. Jackie Noonan, for example.

“It didn’t take me long to figure out that I was as well or better trained than my peers,” she said. “UK gave me an amazing springboard. I came out of my fourth year of medical school and had already done internships. I had already been entrusted with patient care. So my transition to UNC was pretty easy. I will always be very grateful for that.”

The innate mystery-solving component of infectious disease — What is this virus? Where is its source? How is it spread? — intrigued Hoven, a self-described puzzle solver by nature, making it the perfect career fit.

“Infectious disease came naturally to me because so much of it depends on the microbiological laboratory, and that was my field of undergraduate training,” Hoven said. “Plus, unlike cardiology or nephrology or gastroenterology, infectious disease is a total-body specialty. I liked that. You’re dealing with brain, heart, kidney, lungs — all the systems. You have to be a total-body doctor, and that appealed to me.”

#### ON THE FRONT LINES

Upon completion of her fellowship at UNC-Chapel Hill in 1975, Hoven returned to Lexington to accept a job at the Lexington Clinic. In doing so, she became the only infectious disease specialist in private practice in Lexington, a role that put her squarely in the center of the HIV/AIDS epidemic as it was first sweeping Kentucky. Rather unexpectedly, she found herself on the front lines of the single biggest medical story of the era.

“When I first started practicing, herpes was the big thing. But then all of a sudden, this new illness appeared,” Hoven said. “We began to see these symptomatic patients — we were seeing them before it even had a name — who of course went on to be identified as having AIDS and HIV.”

During the early days, Hoven had to watch her patients struggle with severe pain and, often, eventual death as a result of the virus. The drugs at the time were expensive and plagued with side effects. Many patients eventually lost access to their health insurance. “When they lost their insurance, they lost access to

care, and they lost access to medications,” said Hoven.

HIV and AIDS patients at the time also had to deal with immense social stigma, to the point that some local surgeons were reluctant initially to operate on Hoven’s patients, she said.

“I saw it at the front. I saw the pain. The suffering. The death. The misery that went along with it. We’re talking about school teachers. College professors. Businessmen. Wives. Sisters. Everybody of every color. It affected everyone,” said Hoven.

Watching her HIV and AIDS patients lose their access to health care was what, ultimately, launched Hoven’s career in health policy. “It was horrible to see. That started my health advocacy role. I knew I had to do something about it,” she said.

Hoven started local, with advocacy through the Lexington Medical Association. That work led to a role with the Kentucky Medical Association, which led to her work with the American Medical Association, and, ultimately, to the World Medical Association.

These days, Hoven routinely travels through her WMA work to places as far-flung as Taiwan, Norway or Russia. As chairwoman, she works to support the WMA’s mission to “help physicians help their patients across the globe by supporting medical ethics, medical education and quality care,” she said.

Her two-year term at the head of WMA expires in April, but she plans to run for a second term. She has relished the opportunity to see how health care is performed in other nations and the balanced perspective it provides her when viewing the American health care system.

“We are very blessed to be here in the United States, even though we think we have health care problems here. It’s been a very humbling experience because we live in a quite-protected environment. It’s easy to remain in the bubble of American health care but when you start traversing the world, you start seeing things and hearing things and learning an incredible amount,” said Hoven, who was named one of the Top 50 Most Influential Physician Executives and Leaders by Modern

Healthcare Magazine in May 2014. That same magazine named her one of the Top 25 Women in Healthcare in April 2013.

“The interesting thing is, all the physicians of the world have the same core values, in terms of what they want to do for their patients. But it’s when you throw in problems of access, environmental issues and economic issues that things get challenging,” she said. “For example, in Turkey right now, health care professionals and physicians are being incarcerated and put on trial, even murdered, because they’re tending to the sick and injured despite the politics (a recent coup attempt and other civil unrest). So the WMA is working with the United Nations and a lot of other entities, trying to articulate that you can’t do this. It’s a significant violation of human rights.”

*“Over the course of my career I’ve gotten to see the evolution of drugs to treat the disease, and I’ve seen science progressing to improve health and outcomes. Today I can sit in an office and say to an individual with HIV, ‘You’re not going to die of this. You’re going to die of lung cancer if you don’t quit smoking.’ That progression, for me, has been very formative.”*

— Dr. Ardis Hoven

#### THE NEXT CHALLENGE

On a personal level, Hoven has been witness to the evolution of AIDS and HIV from a certain death sentence to a chronic, yet manageable, disease. As its medical director, Hoven was instrumental in the development of Lexington’s Bluegrass Care Clinic into a leading regional HIV care center. Her work on behalf of AIDS and HIV patients has been recognized in awards from numerous groups, including AIDS Volunteers of Lexington and the Lexington Medical Society.

Recalling the early days of the AIDS crisis is painful for Hoven, but she’s also grateful for how far we’ve come. “Over the course of my career I’ve gotten to see the evolution of drugs to treat the disease, and I’ve seen science progressing to improve health and outcomes. Today I can sit in an office and say to an individual with HIV, ‘You’re not going to die of this. You’re going to die of lung cancer if you don’t quit smoking,’” she said. “That progression, for me, has been very formative.”

Never one to slow down, Hoven’s current work as an infectious disease consultant with the Kentucky Department for Public Health has her working closely with both public health policy experts and epidemiologists in addressing two of Kentucky’s most looming health concerns: opioid addiction and the spike in cases of hepatitis C.

Taking on her new role in August 2015, Hoven entered the position hoping to bring greater attention to the importance of syringe exchange programs as one key prevention tool in the fight against the spread of hepatitis C, HIV, and other diseases that are can be transmitted through shared IV needles.

Kentucky has some of the highest rates of opioid addiction and overdose deaths in the nation, and syringe exchange programs allow communities to get addicts into clinic doors to provide them with clean needles — and the possibility of counseling and treatment, Hoven said.

“Based on evidence and science, we know these programs work,” she said. “There are 14



Dr. Ardis Hoven, chair of council of the World Medical Association, met with Dr. Pali Hungin when he became president of the British Medical Association.

Photo: Submitted

or 25 syringe exchange programs in place in Kentucky right now. They have to be initiated by local governments, which is fine, because you have to have the community leadership on board to make them work. Slowly, we’re starting to get there. It’s one example of using health policy advocacy to get information out there and make changes happen.”

Additionally, Hoven is advocating

for changes to Kentucky medical coverage guidelines that limit access to new drugs on the market, which can treat, and even cure, hepatitis C. As things stand currently, the drugs are expensive and often not covered by insurance, and those on Medicaid must prove they have advanced cases of the disease and have been sober for at least six months before they can receive treatment, she said.

“Right now, the only people who can prescribe (hepatitis C treatment drugs) are infectious disease specialists or gastroenterologists, and in many rural communities, there are no specialists. So the restrictions on access are huge. One of my goals is to try to help Kentucky navigate this, so we can follow the lead of states like Florida and Massachusetts, that have been able to make these drugs more accessible,” Hoven said. “We have to treat the disease to prevent its spread.”

While her work with the WMA and in Frankfort keeps her busy, Hoven does try to squeeze in time for travel with her husband to their beach home on Kiawah Island, South Carolina, from time to time. Eventually, Hoven hopes to find time to pick up on her piano and pipe organ lessons, which she abandoned in college. “If I have any regrets in life, it’s that I didn’t continue with at least one of them through my career,” she said.

For now, though, Hoven is enjoying the platform that her WMA work provides. “The fact that I can be a spokesperson, the fact that I have been given the ability and the opportunity to speak out on behalf of patients is, for me, the most important thing that I have ever done,” she said. ■

In 2013, Dr. Ardis Hoven traveled to South Korea to participate in the International Conference on Women & Health: Global Challenges and Progresses.



Photo: Submitted