



Thanks to the extraordinary commitment and expertise of AHLA leaders, the American Health Lawyers Association continues to thrive and serve as the essential health law resource in the nation. The Association's strong foundation reflects a history that is vibrant, meaningful and worth sharing. Finding a way to preserve AHLA's history was especially relevant in light of the Association's 50th Anniversary, which was celebrated throughout 2017.

This transcript reflects a conversation between AHLA leaders that was conducted via audio interview as part of the Association's History Project. More than 60 of AHLA's Fellows and Past Presidents were interviewed. A video documentary was also prepared and debuted on June 26 during AHLA's 2017 Annual Meeting in San Francisco, CA.

March 6, 2017

Gary Scott Davis interviewing Lisa Vandecaveye:

Gary: This is Gary Scott Davis, and it is my pleasure to interview Lisa Vandecaveye as part of the American Health Lawyers Association 50th anniversary oral history project. Lisa, thank you for joining us today.

Lisa: Thank you for the opportunity.

Gary: Let's start with a little bit of a discussion about your background. I understand that you hold a joint degree, a JD and an MBA in healthcare administration, and have always been engaged in the practice of health law. Can you reflect a little bit on the evolution of your career from right out of law school and through and including what you're doing today?

Lisa: Oh, sure. Thanks, Gary. I've been engaged in the practice of health law my entire career. I completed a JD/MBA in healthcare administration. I hate to think about it, but it's been back over 30 years ago. I was challenged at that time by several law professors who tried to talk me out of it. In fact, they said there was no such thing as health law. But as I proceeded in my career and very early in my career, I worked for a health system. The primary focus was on risk management and patient care issues. I was the general counsel and also the vice president for the hospital. This involved direct patient care involvement and management of the professional liability claims. In addition to being a general counsel, I had several administrative departments which reported to me, including emergency services, medical records, medical staff relations, quality improvement, and laboratory services. It was a pretty big place, and we had a variety of patient care issues.

One issue I will always remember was a patient care issue involving Jack Kevorkian, who became very popular and was located in Michigan. During the course of my interactions with Dr. Kevorkian, I was appointed to represent the Michigan Hospital Association and the Michigan Death and Dying Commission. Over the course of a two year period, we studied end of life issues and prepared recommendations for the Michigan legislature on Michigan law. This was a very exciting and interesting period of my career. This also created a foundation for my passion, patient quality and patient safety. Fast-forwarding to today, now working for The Joint Commission, I could continue my passion for patient quality and patient safety.

American Health Lawyers Association

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Gary: How, over the course of the 30 years that you've been practicing health law, starting with the fact that you were both an administrator and an in-house attorney dealing with quality of care and patient safety issues, do you see the types of issues that healthcare lawyers are dealing with today? Has it changed? Are those still on the forefront? What do you see, over those 30 years, as the changes in terms of the substance of what healthcare lawyers are dealing with, and perhaps even what you yourself are dealing with?

Lisa: Well, that's a good question, and that's probably one of the primary reasons the American Health Lawyers Association is a significant part of my professional life and my personal life. Over the course of these 30 years, the practice of health law has evolved from risk management to every area in very large, complex organizations. When I look back, I have attended virtually every AHLA annual meeting for over 20 years.

I recall one of the first annual meetings I attended was in Toronto, Canada, and this was a joint meeting between the American Academy of Healthcare Attorneys and the National Health Lawyers Association. This occurred just prior to the merger. This was a very exciting time for the organization which then became the American Health Lawyers Association. Boy, I was so impressed. I loved the excitement and was inspired by the leadership. I started volunteering for very small activities.

In addition, at the Toronto meeting, the association sponsored several family events. One of the family events was a walk on Monday morning. Our entire family participated. I remember my husband pushing our daughter in a stroller. Whenever possible, I had my daughter travel with me on trips out of town, and she has attended virtually every AHLA annual meeting and considers many of the AHLA members part of our family. We have many wonderful memories with our AHLA family.

In addition, AHLA has provided me with so many career opportunities. I couldn't begin to talk about all of them, but there are a few that have occurred to me. My first speaking engagement at AHLA was with Mark Kadzielski in Chicago at the Sheraton at an annual meeting. It's really funny how certain events you always remember. Mark was kind. Mark was amazing. He took the time to teach me how to develop a presentation and coached me through the planning and through the presentation. I will always be grateful to Mark.

In addition, AHLA over the course of the years has provided a whole breadth of other opportunities. Speaking engagements, I think about 50 for AHLA and over 200 over the course of my career. Having the opportunity to chair a practice group, to serve on the board, and to also serve on virtually every board committee. AHLA has been an important part of my career and my family, and in addition, when I was active with AHLA, Sunday was our designated AHLA day and I worked on projects. My family was very supportive, because they also saw the value in the development of my career.

Gary: One thing I know is very important to you in your involvement with the association is the public interest work that the association does, which sometimes falls a little bit in the background of all the other things that the association does. But I know for you, public interest has always been at the forefront. Can you share with us a little bit of your experience and thoughts about public interest and the importance of public interest to the members of the association and to the association itself?

Lisa: That is a great question. As you know, I do love public interest. When I look back at the history, the public interest activities began after the merger of the American Academy of Healthcare Attorneys and the National Health Lawyers Association. At that time, the AHLA was very focused on member benefits and public service. As a 501(c)(3) organization, public interest was an important part of the nonprofit status. In the early years of public interest, AHLA had an annual colloquium on critical health law issues. The first colloquium was in 1997. Later, under the leadership, inspiration, and hard work of Elisabeth Belmont, the public interest committee began producing public interest resources. Wow. That's all I can really think about it is wow.

When I look back at this, it was just in another exciting time in my life. I began working with Elisabeth Belmont and the public interest committee. We worked on several free public publications, emergency preparedness, choosing a long-term care facility, comfort at the end of life. It was just so much fun, and it was so creative working with Elisabeth, Melissa Markey, Cindy Wisner, and many others producing documents which can assist the public and our community on so many healthcare issues. My passion for patient safety and patient quality was ignited as we worked on these projects.

In 2009, I had the wonderful opportunity to work with Nathan Kottkamp and Louise Joy and the AHLA public interest team under the leadership of Kerry Hoggard. We produced a video called Loving Conversations, a story about the importance of healthcare planning. I understand over 10,000 copies have been distributed today. As of this afternoon when I searched on YouTube, it had over 4,000, almost 5,000 hits. Very amazing to see that this document is still valuable today. Obviously, it's not at a million hits, but to be able to provide value to the public, I think, is so critical.

Since 2004, the public interest committee has produced over 37 publications which are free to the public. Since 1997, the public interest committee has had 10 colloquiums or convener sessions ranging in topics from the corporate practice of medicine, pan flu, and legal issues impacting the transgender community. I had the wonderful opportunity to work on the emergency preparedness convener session and also on the transgender discussion earlier this year. I haven't even begun to think about or mention the number of webinars the public interest committee has produced, but of course, none of this is possible without the generous donations from the AHLA members.

The fundraising has grown over the years from about \$11,000 and 30 donors in the year 2000 to last year, 2016, in which over \$42,000 was raised with 3,400 donors. Over the years, in addition, when I chaired the public interest committee, we tried many alternatives to fund these activities, including two live auctions which was a lot of fun for both my family and my AHLA family as we produced and sought donations to that. I feel very sincere, very passionate about the importance of public interest as an important resource to the public, but I also sincerely hope that members of the leadership of AHLA will continue to support it in the future.

Gary: One of the cornerstones of AHLA is the educational materials, programming, that it brings to its members, but as you just touched upon, the public interest transcends the members and also reaches out and affects the public. Can you talk a little bit about the significance of what the association has done in terms of not only educating its members, but the outreach that it makes to the public and the difference that has had that you've witnessed over the course of your career?

Lisa: Well, that's a tough question, because I think as a membership organization, AHLA is truly the premier organization for healthcare law education. As the area of health law has evolved, AHLA has always been, and in my mind will always be, the go-to organization for professional education and professional development. The activities that the members provide, the collegiality, the ability to ask questions, and the ability to be a part of the larger community is an important part of the education in health law. Education of the public through the public interest activities was very targeted on practical tools and on providing information.

In a similar sense, the legal education and the education for the public on health law overlap, and the public interest activities provide the health lawyer the opportunity to share the health knowledge not only with the client, but also with the public. What a great way to improve the quality and safety of healthcare, and to intermingle both of these, the education of the professional and the education of the public, is a true opportunity for the association which has done an outstanding job in the past and will continue to do in the future.

Gary: Talking about the future, and you and I have both been very fortunate to have decades' worth of experience with the association. Looking into your crystal ball, putting on your Carnac hat, from where you sit and from what you've experienced, what do you see as the days ahead for the association? What will it be focusing on, and where can it make the most difference going forward?

Lisa: Well, I think the future's a really difficult issue to discuss right now, but I choose to think of it in a positive way. I think the future for the American Health Lawyers Association is very exciting. It's also going to be very challenging. As we all know, the evolution of healthcare will continue as will the evolution of healthcare law. It's important that AHLA continues to evolve in its education to its members and to the public.

When I look at the future, I certainly hope that we continue to focus on the importance of the patient, the importance of patient safety, and the importance of quality patient care. As you probably can tell from this conversation, this area's really been my passion for my entire career. As we've just discussed, I began my career working in those issues, and it has truly has evolved. It's evolved to this position I have today, which I'll be always grateful to every point in my career, every experience that I've had, and grateful to the association for being a part of that.

Now, being a part of The Joint Commission, I have the opportunity to improve patient safety and patient quality. I work with individuals every day, other professionals who are committed to this same mission, but every experience over my career, like you say, Gary, 20+ years, has contributed to this experience, which is helping me continue to develop as a professional and continue to work with organizations as we improve patient safety and quality. I hope that as health law and healthcare develops, that organizations and individuals leading, participating, and involved in it continue to focus on the importance of the needs of the individual patient.

Gary: One of the nice things, Lisa, about being the interviewee is that you do get the last word. If there's a question that I haven't asked you or a topic that you would like to talk about, what are your closing words for this interview? Before you answer that, on behalf of the association, I would like to express everyone's gratitude for you taking the time to participate in this initiative. We know how important it is to make sure that the history of not only the association, but the evolution of healthcare law, is memorialized, so for generations to come, those who follow in our footsteps will understand the history that preceded their practice, give them greater

context, and hopefully allow them to be better practitioners in their own right as they take over the leadership of the association. Closing thoughts?

Lisa:

Well, when I first started this process and as we talked earlier, I couldn't think about what to talk about. Then I started having way too much to talk about. I did a little bit of research, and with some help from Kerry and our professionals at the American Health Lawyers Association, I was able to gather some data. I think it's important to record that information, record all of the work that's been done by all of the leaders who so passionately have contributed to the American Health Lawyers Association. I'll be forever grateful for all of the work I've had the opportunity to do with members of the association, with the leadership of the association, and with all the individuals that have participated in that process and their families.

At the end of the day, I still feel that it's critical, especially when we spend so much time talking about corporate issues, fraud and abuse issues, there are so many topics that the health lawyer has to be current on. You become a generalist, but at the end of the day, when you have to make a decision, I hope the folks still continue to think about really what's in the best interest of the patient. Hopefully whatever's in the best interest of the patient is the most important decision at the end of the day. Again, Gary, I thank you sincerely. I thank the association for many, many years. I appreciate the opportunity to be a part of this project.