



2021 WSDA Citizen of the Year

Dr. Peter Hampel

Making Order Out of Chaos



QUICK BITES

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Dr. Peter Hampl

- **Resides:** Gig Harbor
- **Undergraduate Education:** St. Thomas College (St. Paul, Minnesota, 1960-63)
- **Dental School:** University of Minnesota (1967)
- **Post-Graduate Specialized Training:** Bellevue Medical Center, New York City (Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Intern); New York University School of Dentistry (Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Graduate Student); Manhattan Veterans Administration Hospital, New York City (Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Resident)
- **Specialty Boards:** American Board of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons (Retired Diplomate 1999); American Board of Forensic Odontology
- **Private Practice:** Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery in Tacoma (Retired)
- **Mass Fatality Experience:** World Trade Center Disaster (2001); Hurricane Katrina (2005); Hurricane Rita (2005); Region X Forensic Odontologist, Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team (DMORT)
- **WSDA Member:** Since 1971
- **Interests:** Family (including twin 11-year-old grandsons), Gardening, Hunting and Fly Fishing
- **Favorite quote:** "We are at our best when we serve others." — Dr. Ira Byock, Palliative Care Physician

Peter Hampl will tell you flat-out that he hasn't done anything that anyone else doesn't also do.

The 79-year-old Gig Harbor resident looks

every bit the part of the relaxed retiree, finding time to enjoy outings with Jeanne — his wife of 53 years — hunt ducks, and visit with his twin 11-year-old grandsons.

But don't let the 2021 WSDA Citizen of the Year fool you. Spend an hour talking with him and you'll quickly come to appreciate his love of forensic dentistry and the dental profession, which he has given back to time and again, in remarkable and extraordinary ways that few others in his profession have.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

A native of Minnesota, Hampl spent most of his younger years in his hometown of St. Paul, and lived with his parents from grade school through dental school at the University of Minnesota. Then, his life's trajectory changed in a big way.

In 1967, after graduating from dental school, Hampl expanded his universe and moved to New York to start an internship in oral and maxillofacial surgery at Bellevue Hospital, one of three hospitals on the New York University campus.

He and his fellow oral surgery residents and interns were the only dentists in the entire medical complex — which made them valuable to another key institution

housed at the site: the New York City Medical Examiner's Office. At the time, Hampl was single and the only member of the oral surgery staff who was living in the doctor's residence at Bellevue. Since he was available, Hampl became the go-to support person to help the medical examiner conduct dental identifications.

"One night this old guy comes tottering down the aisle — and I didn't pay him much attention. I thought he was the janitor or something," said Hampl. "And he says, 'Hi, what're you doing son?' And I guess I'm 25 at the time so I guess I am a son to this guy who was probably 65 or 70. And I say, 'Oh, we're doing a dental ID.' And he says 'OK' and totters off. And my assistant says, 'Do you know who that is?'"

Hampl was, admittedly, oblivious.

As fate would have it, it was Dr. Milton Helpern, the man considered the father of modern forensic medicine in the U.S. and one of the founding fathers of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences. "Sherlock Holmes with a microscope." Dr. Helpern is often referred to as the most famous Chief Medical Examiner in the history of the City of New York. He co-wrote the 1954 book, "Legal Medicine, Pathology and Toxicology," considered the definitive work on forensic medicine.

A week or two later, Hampl was back in the morgue — and with a greater appreciation for "the janitor." Dr. Helpern came through again, but this time, invited Hampl up to his office, leaving him to think he was about to be fired from an otherwise voluntary position.

"Heads of departments do not call interns into their office unless you really screw up," Hampl said.

As it turns out, he wasn't fired. In fact, far from it. Dr. Helpern proceeded to chat with Hampl in his office regularly, and from that point on, treated Hampl to what he considers a mini fellowship.

A CAREER IN MOTION

Hampl's time in New York not only set his career in motion, but also chartered a course for the next 50+ years of his life.

It was while working at Bellevue Hospital that he also met, and later married, his wife, Jeanne, a native New Yorker. The two explored all over the U.S. for a place to call home, with neither partner wanting to move to one another's hometown. So it was a visit to the Pacific Northwest — with the mountains and Puget Sound in full glory — that convinced the Hampls to make their home out West and to establish his oral surgery practice in Tacoma.

As a new oral surgeon, Hampl found he had time for extra projects, and wrote a letter to the Pierce County coroner, offering his services.

"I bet you that letter didn't even hit his desk before he was on the phone to me," said Hampl. "He said, 'I've been looking for someone like you for years! Get in here!'"

And that's where it all took off for Hampl.

"I just was sort of thrust into it, not knowing the magnitude of what was going to happen."

Given his knowledge and expertise in forensic odontology, Hampl quickly became an expert



Whether it's spending time with his wife, Jeanne, or hooking a beautiful trout, Hampl has always had a passion for the outdoors.



witness in a variety of criminal and civil cases on issues related to not only dental identification, but also bite marks, dental age estimation and, sometimes, dental malpractice cases — for the defense and the plaintiff.

"I find it extremely interesting that someone wants my knowledge for a totally different reason than why I was taught it," said Hampl.

In the early 1980s, the Legislature was considering how to improve death investigations within the state of Washington, and enacted legislation known as the Death Investigation Improvement Act. In 1983, Hampl was instrumental in the development of the Washington State Patrol's Unidentified and Missing Person's Unit, which has since been used as model for other states.

And then, sometimes, you stumble into a solution for a problem you didn't know even existed.

In 1987, Hampl returned to Olympia again to secure passage of the Denture Identification Bill, which requires that all removable dental prostheses be marked with the name of the patient for whom the device was created.

"My purpose for doing this was that if you find a body out and there's a denture, it would be nice if there was a name on it," he said. "That wasn't where it really helped. Believe it or not — before 1986, if you went to an extended care facility, you could walk in and ask the supervisor to see the 'denture drawer' and they would take you into a utility room and open a drawer full of dentures. So now there are no longer any 'denture drawers' in extended care facilities," he said.

"I had no idea this was a problem, and I corrected it!"

DEALING WITH DEATH

Forensic dentistry is, in many ways, counter to the practice of dentistry itself.

As Hampl himself notes, forensic dentistry is not about treating patients. The definition of forensic dentistry is the application of dental knowledge to the legal justice system. There is also no formal training in dental school in forensic dentistry — it is knowledge acquired from postgraduate training.

"I had one of the greatest oral pathologists of his time, Dr. Robert Gorlin, who was a pioneer in syndromes of the head and neck. I can remember him coming [to the dental school classroom] — he taught basic oral pathology to us. I remember, just as clear as it



Symbols of the DMORT patch reflect the professions represented, including images of a fingerprint (forensics), teeth (dentistry), a computer, a DNA strand, a skull with calipers (forensic anthropologists), a flying dove (funeral directors), and a caduceus of medicine on the scales of justice (forensic pathologists).

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to me, are specimens — they're not people. Their soul, their inner being, their karma — whatever your thing is — is gone. And my job is just to do a job — just to get them back to where they belong. Make order out of chaos."

was yesterday, he walked into the classroom and sat down and said, 'You know you can identify people through their teeth.' That was the extent of my forensic dentistry training. One statement that took 30 seconds. And that was it."

That's the clinical side.

The human aspect of the practice, though — dealing with people who may have died from traumatic circumstances, in a mass fatality event or as victims of a crime — carries with it tremendous responsibility. Hampl relies on his faith to help him maintain perspective on his role as an investigator and in helping families come to terms with the loss of a loved one.

"The bodies that I see, to me, are specimens — they're not people. Their soul, their inner being, their karma — whatever your thing is — is gone. And my job is just to do a job — just to get them back to where they belong. Make order out of chaos," he said.

Even though DNA has become an integral part of victim identification, Hampl says most identifications in mass fatality disasters are still done by dental comparison "because it's quick, simple and inexpensive."

"The families want to know yesterday about where their loved one is and to tell them that it's going to be six or eight weeks? Or the budget doesn't allow for it?" he said.

"I love the challenge of utilizing my knowledge for something that, like I say, 'I wasn't trained to do!' I was trained to treat living people, get them out of pain. These people aren't in pain — they're not with us anymore. And whether it be 9/11, Katrina, Oklahoma City bombing or any of those — I belong to national team — extremely dedicated people, knowledgeable. It's a team effort."

Hampl knows firsthand the intensity and the professional responsibility associated with assisting in identifying victims at mass fatality events. As a member of the Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Teams (DMORT) for Region X, which includes Washington, Alaska, Oregon and Idaho, Hampl is one of a network of experts in the field of victim identification and mortuary services called on in times of crisis. For Hampl, that has included work identifying victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, as well as the World Trade Center disaster.

In October 2001, Hampl found himself returning to Bellevue Hospital, the same hospital where he once was an intern and met the father of modern forensic medicine. Only now, that corner of the hospital campus included the 9/11 morgue, where Hampl served as chief of the ante mortem section as part of the DMORT team. He would go on to serve a total of three deployments to the 9/11 site, each visit lasting two weeks, the standard length of stay for DMORT team members.

The work was grueling on every level — physically, intellectually, and emotionally. By his second and third visits in January and April of 2002, the work had slowed and the media attention receded, but the task of identifying each and every victim was still paramount.

Hampl recalls his encounter at the end of one of those long days with a New York firefighter who walked into his makeshift office, covered in gray dust from working at Ground Zero.

"I understand you identified my brother today," the firefighter told him.



MEDICAL TEAMS INTERNATIONAL



Hampl has traveled as a volunteer with Medical Teams International, providing free dental care to people all over the globe. Here, Hampl cares for a patient during a 2004 visit to Burkina Faso, located in West Africa.

"And he and I cried. Just the two of us. He wanted to see the x-rays. So I sat down there and he started nodding his head. He had been there every day since September 2001 — this was April 2002. His brother was also a fireman," said Hampl.

Making order out of chaos.

MEDICAL TEAMS INTERNATIONAL (AND AT HOME)

Hampl's volunteer efforts haven't been limited to forensic medicine; they extend to caring for underserved patients here and around the world.

The dental chair in Burkina Faso wasn't so much a chair as a suggestion of a chair. But for Hampl, it was what was available to use while treating patients in the country's capital of Ouagadougou.

When he arrived there as part of an outreach trip by Medical Teams International, the chair was in pieces — the back was not attached to the seat.

"They were really excited to have us there," said Hampl, "and I didn't want to be rude, but I said, 'This chair needs bolts!' And within 10 minutes, the bolts showed up."

(The paint matched, he noted, so the chair had style if not structure.)

Standing on bricks, working long hours in 100-degree weather for two to three weeks, Hampl and the other Medical Teams volunteers worked on patients who walked barefoot, for miles, to seek treatment and care. Other Medical Teams missions have taken him to Uganda, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Honduras. Hampl emphasizes that he was always part of a team providing care.

Hampl has also provided many of these same



services here at home often in the parking lot of St. Clare Hospital in Lakewood, serving people from all over the South Sound.

"Dr. Hampl was my superstar," said Fredda Smith, EFDA, a former staff member at Medical Teams. "I could call him any time with questions, concerns, or requests for an extra day volunteering on the mobile dental clinic because a patient was in pain or had an infection," she said.

"Dr. Hampl will always be my Volunteer of the Year. His compassion for patients with little access to care is enormous. He is my hero!"

CITIZEN OF THE YEAR

Dr. Jeff Parrish, a WSDA past president and chair of the 2021 Citizen of the Year nominating committee, said the award is different from other association honors because it celebrates an individual's service outside of their regular practice.

"He was stunned," said Parrish of the phone call to Hampl about the award. "Getting to make that call is a real highlight — people

don't know they've been nominated and are generally taken aback by winning — and Peter was genuinely taken aback, and I loved it," added Parrish. "The nominees for this award all have big hearts. They're unselfish. Willing to spend considerable amounts of their personal time in service to others. They're engaged in a wide spectrum of activities, but all of them are unselfish and have big hearts."

Fellow committee member Dr. Brittany Dean said Hampl's work with forensic odontology is impactful — not just the many hours that he has given to it, but also at the systemic level to create task forces for the state to better address getting answers after tragedies or crimes.

"It's kind of peripheral to dentistry — dentistry can play a role there [in the Legislature] but he's taken it on as his mission," she said.

Hampl sincerely appreciates the award and recognition of a career and a profession that

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fortunate, lucky, whatever you want to call it. At age 79, going on 80, I have my health, I've had a really good life, I love the profession. I just thought what I was doing was normal!"

has brought him so much personal gratitude.

"I've been very, very fortunate, lucky, whatever you want to call it. At age 79, going on 80, I have my health, I've had a really good life, I love the profession. I just thought what I was doing was normal!" said Hampl.

"I didn't consider it out of the normal pale. Anyone else in the profession would do the same thing." [WV](#)



Hampl is an avid — and successful — duck hunter.