

Reflections on a Visionary Career

By Beth Krane

In a chapter he was invited to write for a soon-to-be published book *Lives Lost, Careers Changed, and Survival 30 Years On: Narratives from HIV/AIDS Pioneers*, Jeff Fisher shared why he and his brother and long-time collaborator, Bill, “were excited - even compelled - to join the fight against AIDS.”

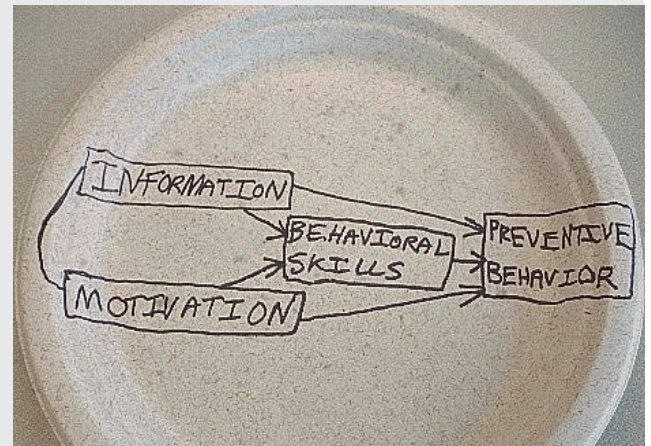
“A curse (or a distinct benefit) of growing up in the 1960s was a pervasive need to believe that one’s work could have the potential to help change the world,” Fisher wrote.

When he retires at the end of the summer, the UConn Distinguished Professor of Psychological Sciences and Founding Director of what is now the Institute for Collaboration on Health, Intervention and Policy (InCHIP) will close a chapter on a career that has spanned more than four decades and produced lasting changes - in the field of health behavior change, in the lives of people at high risk for disease and adverse health outcomes around the globe, in the fabric of a Research 1 university, and in the careers of the many graduate students, post doctorates and junior faculty he has mentored.

Researcher and Interventionist

Fisher, described by colleagues as a rigorous thinker who has profoundly impacted a generation of researchers in psychology, public health and beyond, has published extensively in many areas in the field of health behavior change, including theory development and intervention design, implementation, evaluation and dissemination. He is one of the pioneers who helped define the field of HIV prevention behavioral and intervention science and the

lead author on his and Bill Fisher’s highly-cited and utilized Information-Motivation-Behavioral Skills (IMB) Model of HIV Risk Behavior Change, published in *Psychological Bulletin*, one of the field’s top journals. At least 50 published, rigorously evaluated and effective HIV prevention interventions have used the IMB Model to reduce HIV risk behavior in different populations around the world, and effective interventions based on the model also have been developed to change behaviors in a number of other health areas, including medication adherence,



The initial sketch of the IMB model created by Jeff and Bill Fisher

medical care initiation and maintenance, diabetes self-management, and obesity prevention. Some of those interventions have been adopted by public health officials in different countries to prevent HIV transmission and other health conditions.

“Even today, more than 20 years since he published that paper, that theory continues to

shape what we do in health behavior change. Nothing has surpassed it in HIV prevention or health behavior change,” said Delores Albarracin, a psychology professor at University of Illinois and the current editor of *Psychological Bulletin*. Fisher served as Albarracin’s mentor on her first National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant shortly after publishing the IMB Model.

One of the most impactful interventions designed by the Fisher brothers is Options for Health, which addresses HIV risk behavior among people living with HIV (PLWH) who are receiving routine HIV medical care. The intervention is significant because it was among the first to focus on the HIV prevention needs of PLWH, who have the potential to transmit HIV to others and contract other pathogens themselves through risky behavior. With it, the Fishers formed novel collaborations between psychologists, physicians, lay health counselors and PLWH with the goal of lowering risk behavior in PLWH. Proven effective and recognized by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Options has been disseminated broadly in the U.S. and Africa and saved lives.



William Fisher and Jeff Fisher

“Everything we have ever done in our careers has been an invention,” said Bill Fisher, a Distinguished Professor of Psychology and of Obstetrics and Gynecology at University of Western Ontario. “Nothing has ever been taken off a shelf. Everything has required creating and testing to solve, or begin to solve, seemingly intractable health problems.”

During the past 25 years, Jeff Fisher has been the principal investigator on 11 NIH grants with his brother totaling more than \$25 million.

Prior to enlisting in the fight against AIDS, Fisher, a social psychologist, also made significant contributions to and has highly-cited theoretical and empirically-based publications in the area of recipients’ reaction to aid, including the effects of peer tutoring and on other countries’ reactions to U.S. foreign aid, with another long-time collaborator and close friend, Arie Nadler, an Emeritus Professor of Social Psychology and founder of the Institute for Diplomacy and Regional Cooperation at Tel Aviv University.

“We opened a new path in the area of ‘Helping Behavior’ which had been dominated by a focus on help giving,” Nadler said. “Our perspective regards helping as a dynamic social interaction between helper and recipient, which can convey important self-relevant messages to the recipient and impact subsequent recipient self-help behavior.”

Fisher also made significant contributions to the field of environmental psychology.

Founding Director

In 2002, after he already had recruited a handful of highly-regarded HIV behavioral scientists to UConn and his fledgling Center for HIV Intervention and Prevention (CHIP), Fisher had the desire to create a center that was more than a collection of individual NIH grants. He secured financial support from university administration to build a dedicated space for the center on campus, to add positions, to provide numerous exceptional resources to help UConn health-related researchers to excel, and to hold annual internal seed grant competitions to fund pilot work that consistently has led to more federal grants. Fisher continued to recruit new researchers to join InCHIP from other fields at UConn and other institutions, many from Ivy League Universities. He also lured the

world-renowned Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity from Yale University, a major coup, and recently wooed the Center for mHealth and Social Media from UMass Medical School, too.

Today, InCHIP has grown from fewer than a dozen researchers primarily in the field of psychology to more than 400 affiliates spanning many disciplines and UConn campuses and from more than 60 other national and international research institutions. The Institute has brought more than \$160 million in new grants to UConn, and its research has had a global impact in a variety of health domains including HIV, obesity, and cancer.

Administrators and colleagues largely attribute Fisher's success building what is now InCHIP to his strong vision and organizational skills and also to unparalleled perseverance and energy that make him "a force of nature."

"Jeff Fisher's legacy will continue to grow through the burgeoning activities of the most successful Institute in the history of UConn," said former Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs Mun Choi.

Sally Reis, who worked most closely with Fisher in her role as Vice Provost of Academic Affairs, said "Jeff Fisher's accomplishments serve as a model for the life of a highly productive, visionary professor at a Research 1 institution... his record speaks for itself as does his commitment to creating changes that positively affect the public good."

During the years the Provost's Office funded Academic Plan proposals, administrators considered many plans to establish new centers and institutes on campus and urged all new directors to meet with Fisher to learn from his considerable experience, said Larry Silbart, who worked with Fisher first as department head of Allied Health Sciences and then as Vice Provost for Strategic Initiatives.

"Behind closed doors, we would outwardly wonder 'Where will we get the next Jeff Fisher?'" Silbart said.

Mentor

Fisher has mentored many graduate students during his career as a professor, including 15 for whom he served as a major advisor and eight of whom earned prestigious National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) National Research Service Awards (NRSAs). Those he trained consistently mention his extremely high standards and his unwavering support. They have gone on to establish their own highly productive careers.

"Jeff pushed me to achieve things I didn't think were possible and I have no doubt that is what set me on an amazing trajectory for a career in academia," said Susan Kiene, a former doctoral student of Fisher's who is now a Professor of Global Health at San Diego State University with a strong portfolio of HIV prevention grants.

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Susan Kiene, Professor of Global Health at San Diego State University

Kiene also said having the opportunity to work with Fisher in South Africa shaped her research interests and has led to her continued work in sub-Saharan Africa.

Another former doctoral student who recently received a prestigious American Psychological Association early career award and now works and performs research at the National Cancer Institute, Becky Ferrer recalled Fisher's openness to her adding an emotion component to the IMB Model: "I'm not sure how many advisors would have been not just supportive of, but excited about, a graduate student 'improving' his signature theory, but Jeff really was."

Angela Bryan, a Professor at University of Colorado at Boulder who worked for Fisher as a post-doc and whose research has been continuously funded by NIH for the past 18 years, called then CHIP "a perfect training environment," a sentiment echoed by many other graduate students and postdocs.

"Everything I learned about grantmanship and about how to do research on a grand scale with the potential to change people's lives, I learned from Jeff and Bill," Bryan said.

Mary Jane Rotheram, who led CHIPTS, a very successful national center for HIV prevention at UCLA funded by NIH, noted that, in addition to Fisher's research, his mentorship is among his most important professional achievements.

"Jeff has strategically positioned his team and his trainees in some of the most important institutions nationally, spreading his legacy across time and region. His South Africa work similarly leaves a legacy both in his trainees and the programs that are entrenched in the community," Rotheram said. "Our challenge will be how to maintain his work."