

CAPT Robert A. Fortune, USPHS, (Ret.)

Captain Robert A. Fortune, USPHS, (Ret.), 75, of Wasilla, AK, and an active COA member, passed away on May 12, 2009 of pneumonia at his home.

CAPT Fortune was born March 10, 1932, in Cambridge, NY, and grew up in Ogunquit, ME. Through a generous scholarship, he graduated from Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, and then attended Cornell University where in 1956 he received an A.B. in German literature classics. He received his medical degree from McGill University in 1960 and his Masters of Public Health from Harvard University in 1968.

After an internship at Montreal General Hospital, CAPT Fortune served with the United States Public Health Service from 1961 until his retirement in 1987. He first started as a medical officer and medical officer in charge at the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation at Belcourt, ND (1961-63). He first came to Alaska in 1963. He served as Service Unit Director for USPHS Alaska Native hospitals in Dillingham (1963-64); Bethel (1964-67); on the Navajo Reservation at Fort Defiance, AZ (1970-71); and finally as a director of the Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage (1971-77). From 1977-80, he was detailed to the U.S. State Department as international health attaché, the liaison officer between the U.S. government and the World Health Organization in Geneva, Switzerland. From 1980-87, until his retirement, he was the Deputy Chief of Family Medicine, and worked as a family physician and emergency room physician at the Alaska Native Medical Center, then spent another 12 years as a volunteer operating a weekly skin clinic at the hospital. Fortune was active in several national and Alaskan medical professional associations, as well as the American Society for Circumpolar Health and the International Symposium for Circumpolar Health.

CAPT Fortune published numerous articles on medicine and Alaska and Alaska Native medical history. His books include: "The Alaska Diary of Adebart von Chamisso: Naturalist on the Kotzebue Voyage, 1815-1818," (translator and editor, 1986); "Alaska Native Medical Center: A History 1953-1983," (1986); "Chills and Fever: Health and Disease in the Early History of Alaska," (1989); "The Words of Medicine: Sources, Meanings, and Delights," (2001); "'Must We All Die?' Alaska's Enduring Struggled with Tuberculosis," (2005). His last book "A Century of Adventure in Northern Health: The Public Health Service Commissioned Corps in Alaska (1879-1978)," (2006) was published by the PHS Commissioned Officers Foundation for the Advancement of Public Health.

In addition to his writing, in 1989 CAPT Fortune began training a generation of Alaska's future physicians by joining the faculty of the Alaska WWAMI program. (The name is from the first letter of participating states: Washington, Wyoming, Alaska, Montana, and Idaho.)

Speaking for many Alaska Native Medical Center staff, Oncologist Greg Marino, M.D., remembered Fortune as "our dear friend, colleague, mentor and role model. Many of our senior physicians were inspired by his leadership. He was a well-known physician who dedicated his professional life to the care of Alaska Natives. He was also a scholar and widely recognized as 'the medical historian of Alaska.'"

CAPT Fortune continued his close affiliation with the USPHS Commissioned Corps after retirement. He will be dearly missed by his fellow Commissioned Corps Officers, colleagues, friends, and patients.

CAPT Fortune was preceded in death by his father, Dr. Stanley Theodore Fortune of Overisel, MI; his mother, Susan McGraw Fortune of Surry, ME; his brother, Edward Taylor Fortune of Ogunquit, ME; and his sister, Barbara Anne Bickford of South Deerfield, MA. He is survived by his beloved wife of 49 years, Sheila; his daughter and son-in-law, Willa and Kevin Ryan of Shave Lake, CA; his son and daughter-in-law, Alex and Rebecca Fortune of Milwaukie, OR; his son and daughter-in-law, the Rev. Andrew and Heather Fortune of Balfour, British Columbia; and his sisters, Patricia Freeman of Marshfield, MA, and Nancy Westervelt of Winslow, ME. CAPT Fortune's memorial services were on May 23, 2009 in Anchorage, AK.