paving the way:

Lester Breslow

Through a seven-decade career

As one of public health’s leading figures, Dr. Lester Breslow has established a track record for being ahead of his time. So it’s not surprising that along the way, some of his most prescient ideas have been met with, shall we say, skepticism.

After completing his service in World War II, Breslow approached California’s director of public health proposing to start a chronic disease program in the state. Even as a young local health officer in Minnesota, Breslow had harbored big ideas about where the field should be headed: He saw a population that was living longer and, as a result, beginning to suffer more from age-related chronic conditions such as heart disease, cancer and stroke. “There was a focus almost exclusively on communicable diseases when I started,” Breslow recalled a few days after his 96th birthday. “I felt public health needed a broader vision.” By the end of the war, he was also interested in studying the possible link between tobacco and chronic disease risk. California’s public health director wasn’t hearing any of it. “He said, ‘Why don’t you bring those crazy ideas back to Minnesota and try them there,’ ” Breslow says with a smile.

Ultimately, Breslow got the job he sought and would end up in the position of the man who had dismissed his vision. But as he rose to the level of California’s top health official, he continued to encounter skeptics in high places. By the 1960s, Breslow was interested in studying whether lifestyle behaviors – from regular exercise and sleep to maintaining an optimal weight and not smoking or excessively drinking – influenced health and longevity. The response of the National Institutes of Health panel of scientists who reviewed his initial study proposal: “Unanimous rejection,” Breslow says, smiling again. “They and many others thought the idea was bizarre.”

More often than not, Breslow’s “bizarre” ideas would become conventional wisdom. Three of his studies linking tobacco use to disease were later cited in the U.S. Surgeon General’s landmark 1964 report. His Alameda County studies – which found, among other things, that a 45-year-old male who followed six of seven healthy habits had a life expectancy 11 years longer than a peer who followed three or fewer – helped to usher in a new era of health promotion.

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As California’s public health director Breslow had another idea that was ahead of its time – the concept that the organization of medical services has a major impact on the population’s health, and that it should be studied as a scientific discipline. Two other leading advocates of that idea, Milton and Ruth Roemer, were on the faculty at the UCLA School of Public Health; they were influential in bringing Breslow to the school, where he would serve as dean from 1972 to 1980, and as a dean emeritus ever since.

Among Breslow’s most enduring legacies was to increase public health’s attention to chronic diseases. And yet, some six decades after California’s public health director suggested he take his “crazy” ideas back to Minnesota, Breslow was characteristically outlining a new, more ambitious vision for his profession. At age 89 in 2004, he was the featured speaker at the school’s annual lecture established in his name. Breslow proposed a new era focused more comprehensively on promoting health rather than on merely combating infectious or chronic diseases. By now, given his track record, skeptics were much harder to find.