Opening Address

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I suppose most of you don't know I was born here and my oldest and closest friends from childhood come from Washington. Last night, I was dining with a few of these friends and one of them said with a distinct twinkle in her eye, "Now Helen, what are you up to and what are you doing with an Immunology Center? What do you know about immunization?" She was all ready for a good giggle with her old friend about this new eccentricity of my behavior. I was surprised at the passion with which I replied. I told her I was here because of all the things I've learned of in the last years—the last 25 or 30 years of my life—nothing do I believe in so tremendously as immunization. I also believe that it's a hard thing to break through to the average mind the importance of immunization and anything I can do to lend my voice, my presence; anything I have to help this one great thing is little enough. I said to my friend, "You wonder why I'm interested in this? It's not just another reach for a paragraph in the newspapers. They always think an actress is out for that. It isn't just that, although I'd like plenty of space so that the public will know about it, but it is because the lack of immunization, the lack of knowledge of the prevention of dread diseases twice has struck tragically at my life."

Nearly thirty years ago, I lost a daughter on the brink of a wonderful life. She was nineteen, she was beautiful, and she was, as someone once said of her, the most perfectly adjusted human being she had ever met. She was struck with poliomyelitis and died within 2 weeks. Only a year after that, such great scientists as Dr. Albert Sabin, who is with us today, and Dr. Jonas Salk had perfected polio vaccine and now young children can be given a lump of sugar with a few drops of serum and be protected against paralytic poliomyelitis. I went to work to see if I could press forward at the time of my daughter's death.

Years later, an ailment that had practically ruined my life from childhood and was always attributed to laryngitis, tired voice, or colds was diagnosed as severe allergy. I was suffering from attacks of allergy induced asthmatic bronchitis. I recall whenever anyone asked me about the best memory of my childhood, I would immediately think of the smell of camphorated oil and turpentine because I went to bed with that on my chest so many times during my childhood.

All through my life and my career in the theater there was always a week or so during each play when I had to be hospitalized and it was kept quiet because nobody knew just what was the matter with me. Only in the last 10 years has it finally been explained to me and brought out in the open what has been the

matter.

I am passionate to reach through to the world about immunizations. Have I given you good enough reason for being here? I certainly hope so. I haven't just stopped at being enthusiastic. I have studied and I have learned as much as my old mind could take in.

I'm proud and I'm grateful to cochair this symposium with the Honorable George O'Brien who, as Dr. Bellanti explained to you, is going home to conduct the remainder of his campaign for reelection and is sorry not to be here, but has asked me to wish you all success in this symposium.

Today, you will meet experts who will discuss the current status of immunization in our country and who will emphasize the importance of maintaining good immunization rates. You will be hearing some of the great scientists of our time, such as Dr. Albert Sabin who developed the oral polio vaccine. It is so reassuring to know that the simple method of taking a sugar cube with a few drops of the vaccine will prevent paralytic poliomyelitis. These marvelous vaccines were not available before the 1950's and because of it, I lost my beautiful daughter, Mary. In 1957, I was ever so happy when Dr. Sabin and I were in Geneva where he read his paper and we knew that there was salvation.

Today, we can avoid the pain and anguish of life threatening diseases such as polio, measles, tetanus, diphtheria, whooping cough, and mumps because the vaccines *are* available to you. Before the 1950's, we did not have a choice; many of these vaccines had not yet been discovered and there was no way to prevent these diseases.

Today, the problem is not that there is no vaccines. The problem is that people are not using them. There are several reasons for the decline in immunizations and these will be discussed during this conference.

I am very pleased to welcome you to this symposium which is being sponsored by the Immunology Center at Georgetown University. I have been associated with the Center since its beginning in 1975, and I am proud of the many programs which are providing a totally new approach to patient care, research, and education through immunology. The symposium fulfills one of the Center's educational objectives by making you, the public, aware of the importance of immunizations and the importance of receiving them. You have the opportunity to use the vaccines that we could only pray for.

May God bless you.