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Earl Albrecht
The good one man can do

The emotional Alaskan was pounding on the table and demanding that the federal officials wake up, said Time magazine. No, the man of the hour wasn't the legendary secessionist Joe Vogler or Rep Don Young. Indeed, the hour was more than 50 years ago, for the magazine is dated May 13, 1946.

Dr. Earl Albrecht, Alaska's first commissioner of health, was in Washington, D.C., to make a case that Alaska was sick and needed immediate help. More than 5 percent of the territory's population had tuberculosis – and Alaska had neither the resources nor the facilities to treat them.

Dr. Albrecht won Washington over, just as he won over Gov. Ernest Gruening and the Legislature, which voted one-tenth of its annual budget for an anti-TB campaign.

When it comes to naming the men and women who changes Alaska, the spotlight usually falls on explorers, politicians, entrepreneurs, oil men and miners, but Dr. Earl Albrecht, who died July 18 in Florida at 92, surely is worthy of recognition right with them.

Dr. Albrecht arrived in 1935 and quickly recognized that Alaska was at the fringe of medicine, not just the edge of the continent. Childhood diseases, nutritional deficiencies, and frequent epidemics (as well as tuberculosis) threatened Alaska. Water, sewage and sanitation were handled in near-primitive fashion across most of Alaska.

As Dr. George Hays wrote in 1941, "In Alaska the lack of anything approximating adequate facilities and personnel to prevent and control epidemics, to promote healthful living, to care for those who are needlessly sick and crippled and unable to care for themselves is appalling." Dr. Albrecht devoted more than 20 years to bringing modern public health to Alaska. By the time he headed south in 1956, tuberculosis was under control and public health doctors and nurses were delivering treatment and training to much of the territory.

Dr. Albrecht obviously couldn't treat everyone. But he had remarkable leadership skills that inspired others. Many Alaskans are living healthier, happier lives because he refused to accept the idea that disease, squalor and misery were beyond his reach – or beyond the reach of medicine.