

[<< back](#) **1997****Florence Haseltine**

Florence Haseltine characterizes her career as "bridging the gap between bureaucracy and science." As the Director of the Center for Population Research at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development of the NIH, she manages research projects funded by the federal government relating to issues of reproduction. Her interests and reputation are not confined to grant management, however: she is a busy advocate for women's health research more broadly defined.

Although Haseltine's father was the scientist in the family — he was a physicist for the military — it was her mother who "always pushed me to be a scientist because she thought that was a good profession, despite the fact that she feared I'd never get married." In fact, Haseltine and all three of her siblings became scientists (her brother, William Haseltine, is the highly-visible, some say flamboyant, CEO of the biotechnology firm Human Genome Sciences).

Florence Haseltine was particularly interested in becoming an astronaut, influenced by the proximity of the Naval Weapons Station in China Lake, California, where she grew up. "Most of the senior men at the Weapons Station were physicists. This was during a time of rapid expansion of weapons during which the government appreciated the importance of basic research, and invested in it accordingly. Weapons research was considered an honorable thing to do." Haseltine was especially inspired by some women mathematicians on the base who, though few, were greatly respected by her father. Haseltine later discovered that being the only or one of few women could work to her advantage, "at least for getting noticed," she observes.

When Haseltine was applying to college she was told she could go to either Berkeley or California State University, Bakersfield. (Even at a young age this choice appeared to be a no-brainer.) At Berkeley, which she attended from 1961-1964, Haseltine majored in physics at first, changing to biophysics. She remembers that, "I really loved Berkeley. It was a good time because it was before everything exploded." She continues, "I used to ride my old three-speed bicycle and no one else rode bikes then. I would wear a red coat and carry a briefcase, so people knew who I was." As highly as she regarded Berkeley, as an academic institution she recalls experiencing sexism, which she attempted to combat by signing her name "F. Haseltine" on assignments. She says she often succeeded in fooling her teachers into thinking they were grading a man "because I have messy handwriting."

Haseltine says that she was destined to go to MIT for her Ph.D.: "I knew I was going to MIT from the time I was five years old. My father had gone there, my grandfather had gone there, and I was going to go there." Her degree, in Biophysics, was earned alongside David Botstein, Judy Sipis, Ray White, and Peter Rosenthal, among others. Of Botstein, she remembers that one day he borrowed her new pipette, which made her angry, so she threw a water bath at him. She also reports setting her lab bench on fire quite frequently. Haseltine acknowledges the first-rate education she received at MIT and claims great respect for the institution, though paradoxically she summarizes her time there as, "I hated it." Haseltine predominately attributes this bitterness to "cruel" treatment by faculty who told her that her work was "not good enough." She also found MIT "even more sexist than Berkeley." For example, she was advised to take a few more years while her (first) husband finished his Ph.D there. As it turned out, Haseltine would complete her degree before he finished his. They were also divorced during this time, adding to the mixed memories of her graduate years.

After completing her Ph.D. at MIT, Haseltine pursued an M.D. at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx. She found Einstein to be very different from MIT: "they helped you and were supportive of your career and there wasn't as much sexism." Haseltine describes her years in medical school and internship as some of the best of her life. She was surprised to find that she not only liked research, but that she enjoyed "the art of medicine." She had wanted to be a geneticist at first, but found patient interaction satisfying so she instead pursued Obstetrics & Gynecology, allowing her clinical as well as research opportunities in *in vitro* fertilization. Eventually her clinical and basic research training were parlayed into behavioral research on people who pursued *in vitro* fertilization. Her data demonstrated that couples who chose this intervention were generally well-educated, in their thirties, and had enough time to come in for the procedure. Interestingly, she also discovered that insurance coverage did not have an impact.

The recent events and announcements about cloning are of particular interest to Haseltine. She observes that a positive outcome of the Wilmut announcement is that it will inspire others to work more in the area of reproductive research.

Haseltine's office at the Center for Population Regulation is on the top floor of a government building in Rockville, Maryland, the outer walls of which are composed of glass from floor to ceiling. Among the many photographs there of Haseltine and her family, the one of her with her two daughters on the top of a Colorado mountain stands out. She also proudly displays herself with influential women in government, including Health & Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader

Ginsberg, and first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. But of the many awards she displays, she is proudest of a trophy entitled, "Outstanding Learning Disabled Achiever Award." She explains, "I am severely dyslexic and I can't spell, but computers and spell-check have saved me." She continues, "people think you are stupid if you can't spell, so I get all the latest in electronic gadgets." Haseltine claims that she is often greeted with curiosity when she enters a meeting equipped with a laptop and/or other electronics, but she feels they are critical to help her manage. She notes that these same coping strategies are helpful to those dealing with the normal effects of aging.

The Center for Population Research funds reproductive science on many levels, including basic research, contraception, behavioral research, family planning, and even migration. With regard to contraception, much of the Center's work focuses on the long-term impact of various methods of birth control. Haseltine reports that, interestingly, "the Pill has been studied more than any other drug." The Center often extends initial work performed by and for the FDA to gain approval. For example, when it became clear that condoms were an effective means of preventing AIDS, the Center studied the possibility of creating a new form of condom, working closely with the FDA. Despite the politically controversial nature of contraceptive research, Haseltine views such work as fundamental. "After all, everything starts from an egg," she points out.

Haseltine has concentrated attention recently on encouraging basic research in Ob-Gyn, not a lucrative choice compared to delivering babies. In order to encourage physicians to choose research, Haseltine and others have established a loan-forgiveness program for Ob-Gyns to pursue basic research.

Haseltine has attended the ASCB Annual Meeting for many years, because "it's always interesting. I could go into any session and be fascinated by the talk, because they always get such good speakers." She has served on the ASCB Public Policy Committee since 1990 and feels it is doing an "exemplary" job of educating legislators about how the funding they are providing is being used. She also thinks it is very important to have cell biologists become involved in politics because for so long they had no voice. Haseltine says, "I am very proud of those who have gotten involved through the ASCB: they take it very seriously and have been sure to avoid pork barrel funding for their own type of research."

In 1990, Haseltine formed the Society for the Advancement of Women's Health Research (SAWHR) with a small group of women, half of whom, like her, were either from the federal government or academia; recently she stepped down as President of the Society, which held a dinner in her honor attended by 700 people. Among Haseltine's friends and supporters is Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), whom Haseltine came to know when DeLauro commuted to Washington as Senator Christopher Dodd's (D-CT) Chief of staff and was undergoing treatment for ovarian cancer. Rep. DeLauro is now active on Capitol Hill on behalf of funding for women's health research. The SAWHR has recently published a book edited by Haseltine entitled *Women's Health Research: A Medical and Policy Primer*.

When asked about her unusual family, Haseltine says her siblings are each extraordinary in their own right. Her sister, Susan Haseltine, a mathematician, was one of the early system analysts and still works for Zilan, a large systems networking firm in California. Her brother Bill's multi-million company is often featured in the press in part because of its involvement in many highly-visible patent disputes; he and his wife can also frequently be cited on the society pages. Her other brother, Eric Haseltine, is Vice President of "Imagineering" at Walt Disney Corporation, the division that creates amusement park rides and other entertainment. As a physiologist he came to his job through his interest in visual images and how things are interpreted visually.

Haseltine leads a dual existence, working in Maryland, and living in Connecticut. Her husband, Al Choads, teaches physics at Yale and lives there with their daughters, Anna and Elizabeth, where Haseltine joins them on weekends. Haseltine reports that after 13 years of life separated from her husband and children, they have reached a steady state. "My two biggest fears," she says "are that United Airlines will change its schedule, and fog." Anna, her oldest daughter, just began her freshman year at Columbia University, while her younger daughter, 15-year-old Elizabeth, is starting at the High School of the Community in New Haven. Given her routine, it is not surprising that Haseltine lists her favorite pastime as "sleeping." She also enjoys scuba diving, usually in the Caribbean, though this year she deferred her trip south in deference to paying Anna's college tuition.