

## Public Health and Concerned Citizens 2-10-17

I am frequently asked to describe public health. Sometimes it feels as though I am being asked to defend public health. When that happens I can't help but think of the scene in Monty Python's "*The Life of Brian*" when the People's Front of Judea are complaining about the Romans. The rebels want to get rid of the Romans. "Romans go home!" they write as graffiti. "After all", one of the rebel leaders asks during one of their meetings, "What have the Romans ever done for us?" It was a rhetorical question but a guy in the crowd responds with "The aqueduct". "What's that you say?" "The aqueduct....They gave us the aqueduct." "Oh, oh yeah...that's true. They did give us the aqueduct."

The conversation continues:

"And sanitation. They gave us sanitation."

"Oh, yeah, they did give us sanitation. Don't you remember what the city used to be like?"

"Oh, all right. I'll grant you that. The two things they gave us were the aqueduct and sanitation."

"And the roads."

"Well, yeah, obviously the roads. That goes without saying. But apart from the water, the sanitation and the roads...."

"Medicine" somebody else calls out and they all nod their heads.

"Education" somebody else calls out.

"Oh, alright, yeah, yeah, the water, the sanitation, the roads and medicine and education..."

"And the wine"

"Yeah, the wine, that's something we'd really miss if the Romans left."

"And public baths"

"And it's safe to walk in the streets at night now."

"They certainly do know how to keep order."

"Oh, all right! Apart from sanitation, the medicine and education and wine and the roads and public order and the fresh water system and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?"

It turns out that the movie script was based on actual history. Three thousand years ago, there existed the Mosaic Code of hygiene. It spelled out methods of sanitation still used today, such as washing hands under running water and the practice of quarantine for keeping health people away from sick ones. Egyptian viziers inspected water supplies every ten days to ensure its safety. The Romans followed with civil engineering progress and sewage disposal. Ancient methods do not necessarily become obsolete. We are still trying to prevent illness, protect our groundwater and deliver safe water to consumers.

It's so easy to take our municipalities for granted, isn't it? Well, I'll take that as a compliment for the local town managers and various departments because when all goes well maybe it's because we are doing our job well. How easy it is to forget the problems

that have disappeared. For instance, it wasn't all that long ago that cesspool pipes ran directly onto our ponds and lakes. It wasn't that long ago this country was struggling to fight the national polio epidemic or that Thalidomide was still used and causing birth defects. In 1966 the international smallpox eradication program was established and by 1979 smallpox was totally eradicated from the world. That's pretty impressive, if you ask me.

So, public health continues. We must maintain past accomplishments. That meets the first core function of public health, that of assurance. Public health must continually assess current health programs and challenges to those programs. Public health workers are also responsible for policy development. They must be reasonable policies in response to public health threats. We need all the help we can get when it comes to these core functions of assurance, assessment and policy development. Please assist us by being another set of eyes and let your local board of health know your needs. You can attend our public meetings. You can write to us. And, yes, you can call us anonymously as a concerned citizen.

*Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax and Plympton, MA. She is interested in your views on public health. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or [cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us](mailto:cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us)*