

1-4-19 That's Public Health!

Humans, just like other animals, have always had a sense of survival and learned along the way, generation to generation, improving in methods of survival. I don't know how they learned that separation of food and defecation is important, but they did. That golden rule was probably the first rule of public health. Over the millennia, people have learned that it is a little more complicated than that. Appreciating those complexities and learning how to respond to them continues to this day.

I mention appreciation because whenever I think of the history of public health, I am reminded of the Monty Python scene from *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 healthy people away from sick ones. Egyptian viziers (like a modern-day prime minister of the nation who saw to the day-to-day operation of the government) 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. It wasn’t that long ago this country was struggling to fight the national polio epidemic or that Thalidomide was used, causing birth defects. In 1966 the international smallpox eradication program was established and by 1979 smallpox was totally eradicated from the world. That’s impressive, if you ask me.

So, public health continues, while maintaining 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.

I recently had the pleasure of hearing from a young man who does public relations and website development work for non-profits. He told me about one of those organizations (in another country) that was struggling to raise funds for more doctors and to enlarge their clinic. Someone examined the data and realized that most of the illnesses and deaths were related to poor water quality. People can

easily die from dysentery, for instance. They decided to use their funds for a new well for a safe water supply. They did, it worked, and they did not need more doctors or a bigger hospital after all.

When I shared that story with Dr. Al DeMaria, recently retired from the Department of Public Health, as head epidemiologist, he said with great enthusiasm, “Now, that’s public health!”

Let’s appreciate what we have, recognize and respond to new needs and prevent problems to reduce injuries and deaths.

Here’s to a healthier 2019!

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax, MA. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cathleen,drinan@halifax-ma.org