

10-5-18 History in the Making

Having scratched my way through the television documentary, *Bed Bug Apocalypse*, I turned the channel when I just couldn't watch any more.

The very next channel immediately caught and kept my attention with the story of tuberculosis (TB); the disease, the treatments and the people touched by both. It is so moving that it was nominated for an Emmy. *On The Lake. Life and Love in A Distant Place*, by David Bettencourt and G. Wayne Miller, is a fascinating and touching documentary of real people who fell ill to TB, lived in sanatoriums, (sometimes for years) never knowing if they would survive or not. As you look at the photographs of the 1940's and listen to letters that were written, you realize how frightening and frustrating it was for these people who were told to rest and wait and rest and wait. That was the best they could do.

This movie accomplishes what the best health promotion programs hope to achieve: making people care. By telling the stories of real people, getting a sense of meeting and understanding them with both their fears and their hopes, the disease becomes a believable entity. This is no small achievement in an age when much of this country's population has forgotten what epidemics can do. When there isn't a treatment or a means of prevention, the disease grows to a pervasive enemy, robbing a country of thousands of people and filling the living with dread.

This is just the right time for this story to be told because it was recent enough that we can meet some who survived and also hear directly from the friends and family who lost loved ones to the disease. You could still hear the fear and the pain of loss in their voices. For them, the 1940's was yesterday and the discoveries of the fifty's came too late. I thought of my dear friend whose father recuperated at the nearby and now gone, Plymouth County Hospital, opened in 1916 for tuberculosis patients. The building may be gone but my friend's memories are not.

By 1952, several Nobel Laureates brought the discovery of drugs such as streptomycin that could be used to treat people for tuberculosis. Public health campaigns in the forty's included posters encouraging people to take two minutes to save their lives and get a free chest x-ray. The next campaign aimed at getting people treated with the new anti-biotics, the miracle drugs.

Tuberculosis was not eradicated, though. Today's campaign is back to cough etiquette and sanitation and research, for TB has increasingly become drug resistant. Concurrently, the skyrocketing numbers of AIDS that no one wants to talk about, also produce skyrocketing cases of TB. It is believed that one third of the world's population may be infected with latent TB.

We are usually healthy enough for our immune system to keep that in check. But if your immune system is compromised, as it is overwhelmingly with AIDS, then it surfaces. Also, IV drug users are at risk for TB.

The return and rise of diseases such as tuberculosis brings us full circle, back to hoping that scientists will find a way to stop drug resistance and/or discovery new drugs to use successfully. Bacteria are smart, though. That is why they survive. They can and do develop resistance. Tuberculosis is a very real and current public health issue.

And, yet, you might be tempted to turn the channel and not watch a documentary about the history of tuberculosis, thinking it is “only” history. History is always in the making. We can improve our future by learning from history. Let’s participate in making our own history.

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For a photo of the Hanson TB hospital, see https://opacity.us/site67_plymouth_county_hospital.htm