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PUBLIC HEALTH REPORTS.

UNITED STATES.

A HISTORY OF NATIONAL HEALTH LEGISLATION AND ITS RELATION TO THE U. S. MARINE-HOSPITAL SERVICE.

[Address by Dr. Stephen Smith, New York, before the American Public Health Association, September 16-20, 1901.]

Mr. President and Members of the Association: I esteem it a great privilege to be permitted to attend the first meeting of the American public health association in the twentieth century. Since its inception a period of about thirty years has elapsed, which in the ancient mortuary statistics indicates that a generation of the human family has passed across the stage of life. When your honored president, my long-time friend, intimated to me that it would be appropriate on this occasion to have some words of greeting, counsel, and encouragement from those who were active in the organization of the association, I examined the list of living members to determine who could most acceptably perform that duty. It was painful to notice the havoc which death had made in our ranks in a generation. Elisha Harris, Edwin M. Snow, John H. Rauch, Ezra M. Hunt, Charles B. White, James E. Reeves, Henry I. Bowditch, James L. Cabell, Joseph M. Toner are historic names in the annals of sanitary reform in this country. On this review I am constrained to announce in the language of the messengers who came to the patriarch Job in his afflictions and said, "I only am escaped alone to tell thee."

The chief or immediate object which the first promoters of the association had in view was by organized effort to unify the work of those actively engaged in the administration of public health laws and to nationalize sanitary authority in municipal, State, and national governments. At that period the foundations of our national system of sanitation of cities and villages had but recently been perfected in the establishment of the metropolitan board of health of New York, on the basis of a law largely English in its origin. For this law the country is indebted to the late Hon. Dorman B. Eaton, an early and active member of this association. It formed the basis of the subsequent health legislation of the different States, and may justly be considered the most perfect code of sanitary law that has yet been placed on the statute books. Competent health organizations then existed only in a few cities, notably in Chicago, Washington, Boston, and New Orleans. But even these health boards,

with the exception of the metropolitan of New York, were feeble compared with those now filling their places. The agitation, however, in favor of stringent health laws and their efficient enforcement was becoming more and more intense in all parts of the country, and it was apparent that there should be combined action on the part of all the workers in this new field of reform. To secure the cooperation of all the forces and influences tending to enforce sanitary legislation throughout the country this association was projected. It required scarcely more than the suggestion that such an organization was essential to the reform movement to bring into active sympathy and cordial cooperation the constituent members of the association, and at once the organization was perfected.

The growth of public health administration in this country under the fostering care of the association has even exceeded the most sanguine anticipations of its founders. Thirty years ago there were not more than three or four well-organized municipal boards of health in this country, but to-day there is scarcely a community having a civil organization that has not as an integral part of its government a public health department. State boards of health were almost unknown at that period but now they exist in nearly every State, and by their good work commend themselves to the confidence and support of the people.

At the first meeting of the association the initial step was taken to create a central sanitary authority in connection with the General Government, but it was nearly ten years later and only in the immediate presence of a wide-spread and fatal epidemic of yellow fever that a national board of health was organized. Thus, within a single decade this association had been largely instrumental in the development of a complete system of public health administration in this country, viz, municipal, State, and national. Unfortunately, the law which gave the national board of health its powers and financial support continued in force but four years and at the end of that period Congress refused to reenact it. The result was that the board practically ceased to exist at the end of that period. It is now upwards of twenty years since the national board of health was deprived of its powers and practically ceased to exist, and our national system as originally devised by the members of this association has remained incomplete.

The advice which I think the constituent members of the association would give you at this first meeting of the century would be to remedy this defect in our national sanitary system at the earliest practicable period. Our Government, whose jurisdiction now extends over peoples of every grade of civilization, living under every variety of climatic conditions, requires a central sanitary authority competent to answer wisely and in conformity with the latest teachings of science the multifarious questions relating to the public health of this heterogeneous population which must from time to time be determined in its councils. The failure hitherto to secure from Congress such legislation as would give

the country a proper public health organization at Washington are largely due to the want of harmony of opinions of those who have sought such legislation, and the opposition of the Marine-Hospital Service, which very naturally desires to retain its position. The want of harmony arises from the fact that comparatively few of those who approach Congress on this subject are competent to form a correct opinion as to the nature and character of the public health service which the Government requires. This association alone is qualified to pass judgment upon a bill to organize that service and should assume the duty and aggressively persevere until it accomplishes its object.

It is a fact not generally known that the first members of the association regarded the Marine-Hospital Service as well adapted to become the future public department and endeavored to promote its advancement to that position. It may interest the present members if I refer to that early history, and possibly these facts may be useful in your deliberations.

At the close of the Civil War the Marine-Hospital Service had practically ceased to have any useful duties to perform, and one Secretary of the Treasury had urged Congress to abolish it. Originally created at the close of the eighteenth century, in imitation of the English system of caring for her sailor, a man before the mast, its functions in a great measure ceased when the steamship supplanted the sailing vessel in ocean and river transportation. In the former vessel the sailor's home was on the sea and his Government cared for him when sick or disabled; in the latter vessel he had his own home at the port and cared for himself.

At this critical period in the history of the Marine-Hospital Service, when, technically, there were but few sailors requiring Government care, and a Secretary of the Treasury had advised the abolition of the Bureau, Dr. John M. Woodworth, late a surgeon of volunteers, was appointed its chief officer or Supervising Surgeon-General. Dr. Woodworth was a man of culture, of polished manners, a good organizer, and an enthusiastic student of sanitary science, as then understood. He was an early and active member of this association.

In discussing with him the future of the Marine-Hospital Service, I urged the importance of first assuming as far as possible, all the duties connected with the quarantines of the United States, which grow out of the powers exercised by the Secretary of the Treasury over the customs. If he should succeed in demonstrating the value of medical authority in determining incidental questions arising in the management of quarantines under local administration, the tendency of the Department would be to give the Marine-Hospital Service more and more the control of all questions. Meantime, additional legislation might enlarge its powers and duties in the management of quarantines, until it might attain, first, to a supervisory, and finally, to an absolute administration of their affairs. Advancing along these lines, without any other rival in

the field, the Marine-Hospital Service would naturally assume more and more the position of a central authority on all questions relating to the public health, which come under the cognizance of the General Government. Thus, the Bureau might in time become, if not a health department, at least the permanent branch of the Government service devoted to public hygiene.

Dr. Woodward acted on the suggestion and until his death in 1879, steadily pursued the policy of making the Marine-Hospital Service the central authority in the control of the quarantines of the United States. His first act was an official examination as to the condition and efficiency of all the quarantines under the direction of the Secretary of the Treasury. This investigation extended to ports where either no quarantines existed or only some unexecuted municipal regulations governed the entrance and exit of vessels. The result of this inquiry was an act empowering the Secretary to make additional rules and regulations for quarantines, which were defective and require their enforcement. In case of failure in compliance by the local authorities, the Secretary was authorized to proceed to put the new rules into operation. In addition to these extraordinary powers conferred by Congress on the Treasury Department, the law provided that the Secretary should establish and maintain under his exclusive control and management, quarantines at ports where none existed but where, in the opinion of the Secretary, the public health required the enforcement of quarantine regulations. The execution of this law naturally devolved upon the Marine-Hospital Service, and aggressive action was immediately taken to secure its benefits. Lax and inefficient quarantines were rendered effective and new quarantines were established at many unprotected ports. This was a decisive step in the direction of placing the quarantines of the country under the exclusive control of the Federal Government. The result of this legislation was of the first importance to the sanitary interests of the country, and gave a permanent position to the Marine-Hospital Service.

In 1878 there was much alarm over the matter of the admission of rags from foreign ports, and the President, by virtue of the power given him by the previous quarantine law, authorized the Secretary of the Treasury to make rules governing the quarantines in their reception of this article. Dr. Woodworth gave me the original order signed by President Hayes, remarking, "This is a historical document which begins a new era in the history of the Marine-Hospital Service."

Later in the same year occurred the great yellow fever epidemic and circumstances greatly favored the Marine-Hospital Service, for it became, not only the center of information in regard to the daily progress of the pestilence, but it became the medium of the distribution of charitable funds and supplies to the stricken communities.

Another event of much importance was the appointment of a commission to investigate the facts in regard to the outbreak of yellow fever by visiting the localities where it had prevailed. This was due to the

suggestion of Mrs. Elizabeth Thompson, a wealthy philanthropic lady of New York, who proposed to me to give liberally to a fund for the employment of a competent body of experts. I immediately communicated with Surgeon-General Woodworth, and urged him to accept the offer, appoint the commission, and be responsible for its work. He replied favorably, the money was contributed by Mrs. Thompson and others, the commission was appointed and was composed of southern physicians of large experience in the treatment of yellow fever, and the investigation proceeded during the autumn months.

The epidemic of that year proved to be a national calamity and aroused a popular interest in methods of prevention hitherto unknown. Sanitary authorities in all parts of the country were appealed to for advice and assistance, especially with reference to the proper measures to prevent the return of the pestilence in the following year. The only body competent to answer that question was the American Public Health Association. The officers of this body decided to call the annual meeting in Richmond, Va., and devote the session especially to the late epidemic. Surgeon-General Woodworth consented to present the results of the commission's work as a basis of discussion.

It became evident long before the meeting of the association that whatever might be the special views in regard to preventive measures, the question that would dominate the association would be, "What form of health organization shall be created in the General Government to meet the exigency of a recurrence of the epidemic in the following year?" All great advances in health legislation result from the devastations of epidemic pestilences. It is only under the stress and strain of an epidemic that has destroyed thousands of lives, wasted millions of dollars, and created universal terror, that adequate public health laws can be enacted and effective administrative organizations can be established. The yellow fever epidemic of 1878-79 had this effect, and it became the earnest effort of the members of this association to improve the opportunity to the best advantage.

The excellent work performed by the Marine-Hospital Service naturally placed it in a most favorable position before the public, and its friends endeavored to formulate a bill which would commend itself to Congress and would make that Service the future national sanitary authority. In conference with Dr. Woodworth, we determined that a bill creating a department of public health, on the same basis as the Department of Agriculture, would be in accordance with previous legislation, and thereby meet with less opposition. Such a bill was to provide for a bureau devoted to the duties of the Marine-Hospital Service and other bureaus having the quarantine and public health services in charge. I drafted such a bill, and it was introduced to the Senate at the opening of the session by Senator Lamar, of Mississippi. Like many other bills before Congress, designed to create a public health service, it met with opposition from other departments at Washington,

jealous of the growing power and popularity of the Marine-Hospital Service. Though this opposition had been apparent for years at the annual meetings of the association, it did not take on active form until the meeting occurred at Richmond. There it became so obstructive that no practical results were reached by the association. At the ensuing session of Congress the same opposition was an organized force, that resisted every form of legislation which might, in any manner, favor the advancement of the Marine-Hospital Service. The result was the passage of a bill on the last day of the session, creating a mere skeleton of a board of health, with no power whatever, for either good or evil. When the people of the affected districts of the South learned that Congress adjourned without providing any safe-guards against the return of the epidemic, the greatest indignation was manifested. In some districts, it was reported, the members of Congress were threatened with violence, if they returned without affording adequate relief to their threatened danger. Fortunately, an extra session of Congress was called, and the southern members were only too happy to have the opportunity to pass a supplementary bill clothing the board with suitable powers. This act, however, was limited in its operations to four years. During this period the board faithfully performed all the duties imposed by law, and sought to organize a system of national quarantine administration and interstate sanitary supervision of commerce and travel, in harmony with the most advanced views of authorities. But with the lapse of the supplementary law, and in the absence of any impending epidemic, the Secretary of the Treasury conferred upon the Marine-Hospital Service the power to expend the funds formerly appropriated to the national board, thus bringing that Bureau prominently forward to the position it formerly occupied, but with the added powers exercised by the latter body. From time to time Congress has increased its quarantine and public health duties and added to its equipment. It has its own building like a department of government; its laboratories, where the most accurate studies are made into the causes and methods of spreading infectious diseases; the value of different disinfectants and vaccines, and where antitoxic serums are manufactured and distributed; it has a large and highly qualified staff of medical officers, appointed by the President, after competitive examination; it maintains in foreign ports, where epidemic diseases prevail, medical officers who give constant information to home quarantines and issue bills of health to vessels bound to the United States; it has under its own supervision a large number of insular and interstate quarantines; finally, it is ready at any moment, to aid state and municipal sanitary organizations in their efforts to suppress epidemic diseases.

It appears from this review that for a period of upward of thirty years the U. S. Marine-Hospital Service has steadily advanced in the direction of becoming the department of public health in the General Government, until it requires little more than an adjustment of its organi-

zation to the new career upon which it would enter to fulfill every requirement of that position. As the original promoters of this association gave the first impulse to the U. S. Marine-Hospital Service along the lines of development which would place it at the head of our national sanitary system, and as it has advanced along those lines until it is prepared to assume the rank and title and perform the duties of our central sanitary authority, I may be permitted to suggest that this association should recognize these historical facts and the present situation of our public health service, and unless there are conditions not apparent to the public, begin the new century by inaugurating the U. S. Marine-Hospital Service as such authority. The efforts that have been made in the past to secure from Congress legislation creating some other form of health organization have proved futile, and the future promises much less success, owing to constant advance of the U. S. Marine-Hospital Service in public and congressional favor. If I understand the objections to that Service on the part of those seeking a better form of organization, it is chiefly that the public authorities and sanitarians have no part in its councils. It would not be difficult, it seems to me, to remedy these and other defects if this association exercised its friendly offices with the chief officer of that Service in securing necessary legislation. Asking forgiveness for these suggestions if in any sense they may seem unwise or untimely, I leave the matter to be determined by your better judgment.

Mr. President, it would ill become me to attempt to detail to the members of this association the contributions of sanitary knowledge and experience by the last half of the nineteenth to the first half of the twentieth century. It is sufficient to state that through the labors of its Pasteur, the mysterious realm of the causation of epidemic diseases has been thoroughly explored, and the nature of their causes have been made known; through the labors of its Koch, the life history of these causes have been accurately determined; through the experiments of its Lister, the agencies which destroy these causes and arrest their destructive processes have been placed in the hands of every human being. The century closed with the warfare of man against the multi-form and manifold causes of disease, which beset him on every hand in the flood-tide of success. If that warfare is pressed as vigorously during the twentieth century, as it has been in the last decade of the nineteenth century, it will require no great stretch of the imagination to anticipate that long before this century closes, the whole brood of pestilential or communicable diseases will be exterminated from the earth, and man will reach his normal period of life—one hundred years.