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Public Health in Knox County A Brief History

The 20th Century brought organization, mass immunizations, sanitary standards and home health care to public health service in Knox County.

At the turn of the century, the county was serviced by two health departments: a city health department located in Mount Vernon; and a county health department, also located in Mount Vernon, but servicing the needs of residents outside the city limits. For nearly three-fourths of the century, these two groups would administer public health services.

The city health department was one of the first of its kind having organized in the mid 1850s well ahead of the public health code of 1919 which established the organization for health districts in the state.

The event which spurred state legislators into action was the great influenza epidemic of 1918 which took thousands of lives in Ohio. According to historical accounts, Knox County suffered a full measure of the deadly outbreak although the actual number of deaths is unknown. City residents were more affected than those in the country and some residents avoided visits to the city during the outbreak, which lasted from August, 1918 to January, 1919. Schools were closed from November until early January and many churches canceled services during this time.

There have been various epidemics of different strains of influenza in the years since 1918, but vaccines, new drugs and methods of preventing and treating pneumonia and such complications have prevented any repetition of the terrible scourge of 1918.

Today, the health department works jointly with Knox Community Hospital to offer complimentary flu shots to area residents at community clinics throughout the county. In 1999, more than 6,000 area residents received free flu shots from the health department and hospital, plus additional flu vaccine was offered through doctor's offices, managed care in the work place and at local pharmacies.

Public health during the past 100 years can be described as a journey from quarantines to preventive measures. With the advent of state public health laws came formal quarantines of homes in which communicable diseases were reported. During the first 30 years of the century, boldly lettered and colored cards were tacked at the front entrances of homes where persons fell ill. The program of quarantining ended in the 1930s as advances in medicine robbed such diseases as diphtheria, smallpox and whooping cough of much of their terror. Improved sanitation also ended the threat of typhoid fever.

It would be another 30 years though, before a vaccine would be found for polio, a dreaded crippling disease that affected many. In 1962, effective vaccines for polio were discovered: first the Salk vaccine, given by injection and then the Sabin vaccine, given orally. In the fall of 1962, the city and county health departments working with other local health organizations offered the Sabin vaccine, free, to Knox County children. According to news accounts, 2,000 children made the trip to school buildings in their area to receive a tiny sip of the Sabin vaccine in sugar water, repeated two weeks later. The program effectively ended polio in Knox County. In the late '70s when polio resurfaced in some Amish communities, health department personnel traveled to Amish homes in the county to administer the vaccine.

A continuing program of required immunizations for children from birth through the time the child enters school has helped effectively curb the epidemics of the past. The number of required immunizations for school age children has increased over the years. Of particular interest is the addition of the Hepatitis B vaccine, a series of three shots over a six-month period. All children entering kindergarten are required to have Hepatitis B shots and eventually the state hopes to have all school-age children, grades K-12, immunized for Hepatitis B. Many colleges are requiring the Hepatitis B vaccine for admission. Also, it is recommended for people traveling abroad.

The 1960s represented a period of growth and development for public health. Tuberculosis (TB) was of great concern and the health departments conducted regular TB skin testing while a mobile unit from the state made monthly visits to offer free chest X-rays for TB. There were clinics for measles vaccinations, diabetes testing and rabies shots for household pets.

A dental care program was started in 1967 for those who could not afford dental care. Originally staffed by local dentists, who volunteered their time, the dental program later became a part of the county health department and is now staffed by a visiting dentist from Columbus who is compensated. Also, several local dentists still provide their time providing dental care in the health department clinic at various times during the year. Preventive and routine dental work is available one day a week while a hygienist works two days a week. Funding for the dental clinic has always been limited.

Public input has always been an important part of identifying health concerns. A health survey conducted in 1964 by the Knox County League of Women Voters indicated a need for a "bedside nursing program" which led to the development of the home health program. Originally funded with a \$15,000 grant from the Ohio Department of Health, the program employed one nurse and served only city residents. In its first seven months, home health care was provided for 29 patients and involved 380 visits. Today the home health division of the health department employs four full-time registered nurses, three home health aides, a secretary, and a director. The staff sees more than 300 patients each year involving more than 8,000 visits throughout the county.

In 1968, Knox County was one of two counties in the state to take part in a nutritional study of pre-school children as part of the Child Nutrition Act which created the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program. However it was another 11 years before the WIC program would actually come to Knox County. Fifty families were involved in the program during its first two years. Today the program annually provides nutrition counseling for more than 1,000 women and children. Each month, WIC families spend \$875,104 annually in local grocery stores using food coupons received through the WIC program.

Over the years, the health department has administered and conducted a number of regulated programs involving enforcement along with education to prevent disease and to protect the environment for Knox County. These inspection programs are conducted by the environmental health staff and have garnered some controversy for the department because of the enforcement aspect.

Inspections for many of the programs are conducted year-round such as food protection, solid waste nuisances, sewage disposal and private water supplies. During the summer, the staff is busy with swimming pool inspections, campground inspections, mosquito control and temporary food inspections at festivals, the county fair and public auctions. All inspections are conducted by registered sanitarians and involve health and safety standards to prevent disease and to protect the environment.

Mosquito spraying was a controversial issue during the mid 70s and early 1980s. County residents questioned the use of the pesticide malathion to deter the increasing mosquito population. Area beekeepers claimed the spraying was killing bee hives. Some residents felt the spraying activities were unnecessary and harmful to pets. There were petitions to stop the spraying and in 1979, county residents testified before a state committee about the unnecessary spraying.

Nevertheless, the threat of encephalitis which is carried by mosquitoes, prompted the continued pesticide spraying. Today, a more environmentally friendly pesticide is used and mosquito control continues in the more populated areas of the county.

In the late 1970s, rabies became a problem for the county. In 1978, Knox County had the highest number of reported rabies cases in the state. The situation prompted health officials to issue a quarantine for all dogs and cats and mandated vaccinations. The health department joined forces with other local groups to offer vaccination clinics which were very popular and highly attended. The prevention of rabies continues to be an on-going activity for environmental health.

Among the many things that have changed during the last 100 years is the location of the health department. For years, the city health department was located in the basement of City Hall while the county health department was housed in the basement of the county jail. In 1967, the county department moved to the first floor of the county engineer's building, located behind the courthouse (now occupied by the prosecutor's office).

Merging the two departments had been talked about for years, but serious attempts failed in 1958 and 1962 as officials argued over funding issues. In 1964 the city and county departments began sharing personnel for the first time. Then in April, 1973, both departments were moved to 116 E. High Street in the brick, two-story structure occupied today by Knox Pregnancy Services. Despite being under one roof, the county and city departments administratively functioned separately.

City personnel were housed on the first floor, county personnel on the second floor. The governing boards for both groups met at the same time, with the county on one side and the city on the other.

Attempts to merge the two departments began again in the late '70s. The city nursing supervisor retired in 1976 and the county nursing supervisor was hired to be the nursing supervisor for both the county and the city. In 1978, another merger attempt failed, as the townships feared the city would not continue funding at the present level and that they would have to increase their contributions to maintain the department. Finally, in 1983, the two departments were merged and the Knox County General Health District was formed.

In the fall of 1984, the newly formed county-city health department was moved to the first floor of the former Mercy Hospital where it remained until the summer of 1999. In the fall 1998, the Board of Health was notified it would have to move from its East High Street location to make room for other county offices. When adequate rental space could not be found, the Board of Health decided the time had come for the Health Department to have a home of its own. The Knox County Commissioners donated property at the northeast corner of Gilchrist and Coshocton roads as a site for the new facility. While the new facility was being built, the health department relocated to the old Children's Home on Coshocton Road. The building has since been torn down to make way for the Opportunity Knox building.

The new Health Department facility opened in May 2001. It is a single floor, brick structure, covering approximately 11,000 square feet. Features of the new building include easy access, well-lit exam rooms and service areas, secured areas for privacy and consultation, and a community meeting room for classes and presentations.