

IPHA History

1880-1881 Survey Results

By Dr. Ron Eckoff

In the last issue of *Public Health Matters* we shared the questions from a survey distributed by the newly formed Iowa State Board of Health in 1880-1881. This survey was used to collect data for future study of death records in relation to meteorological conditions and disease. A summary of the answers received for a few of the questions is included below. We have come a long way in understanding disease and prevention.

Question 6 – What diseases were more prevalent than usual?

Most common answers were diphtheria and none. Scarlet fever, measles, pertussis, malarial diseases, tuberculosis, and pneumonia were also listed several times.

Question 7 – Can you assign any cause for the answer in # 6?

Most did not assign a cause. Specific answers were variations on “filth”. Also bad water, poor location and maintenance of privies, drought, and hot weather. “Carelessness of the lower classes in not permitting proper isolation and quarantine.”

Question 28 – Please communicate facts bearing upon, or cases illustrating the causation or communicability of diseases. [Open ended]

Fredrick Becker, M.D., Fayette County: In regard to the prevention of disease I would say that it is my view, that disease and death are especially induced by the use of tobacco, whiskey, masturbation and filth... I would upon the ground of my experience respectfully suggest the education of the young to abstain from these vices and injurious habits by suitable works being introduced in our public schools, and for home reading in families.

G.F. Geise, M.D., Des Moines County. Our butcher, J.P. Wing, has not cleaned his slaughter-house this winter. He is rendering diseased animals, principally hogs, in a tan situated in the township east of this. These animals sometimes lay until they become very rotten. He is extremely careless and filthy. Sometimes after working with these hogs he does not even wash his hands to eat. Butchers with the same instruments that he cuts up hogs with without even washing them. He now has a pile of these dead hogs, about 2,000 pounds, cut to pieces ready for the tank, laying uncovered in Middletown. What shall we do? We have been trying to get the trustees of this

(Danville) township to organize into a board of health, and take care of it, but one of the members, Mr. J.A. Green, is a friend to Wing, so he will do nothing. Wing has by some means, gained the support of another (Mr. Mathews) which gives him the majority and us to stand the stink. We reported him to the grand jury, but he had two good friends there who had it all “cut and dried” to work his case through for him, and succeeded.

L.J. Rogers, M.D., Henry County: The probable cause of disease, more than any other, is no doubt in the drainage leading to wells, bad water, dirty or filthy cellars, dish and wash water poured out at the door. I had an interesting case. Mrs. O., aged 44, had chronic diarrhea, and, finally, nearly all the family: then the neighbors, who came to care for the sick. Tracing out the cause, a leak was found in the well near the top of the water, through which came into the well a thick, black, dirty stream, which impregnated the water. I had the well cleaned, and my patients soon recovered. Up to the time of the cleaning, no medicine seemed to avail anything.

L.C. Wailes M.D., Appanoose County: For the better protection of life and health within the state, I would suggest that we urge the passage of a law by our next General Assembly, that will prohibit persons from practicing medicine, surgery, or midwifery within this State unless they are graduates of some respectable medical college, or unless they have been in practice ten years within this State, or have a certificate of worthiness from a board to be created, or the State Board of Health. Some other States have had similar laws for several years, which has caused Iowa to be crowded with inferior practitioners. The evils of this I have witnessed myself. Let the people have protection.

W.R. Lewis, M.D., Greene County: A child who was said by the attending physician to have a scarlet rash, and was devoid of danger, was allowed to leave home in the desquamative stage, and was allowed to mingle with the cousins, five of whom were seized on the eighth day with the initial symptoms of scarlatina, in all of whom it was of severe form, followed by renal troubles (dropsy, etc.) in four, and ear trouble in one., which shows that a mild case may communicate a severe form of the disease.

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