

Special Insert

It will soon be 50 years since I began my career in public health with the Springfield Health Department. Then there were two health departments in Greene County, one for Springfield and another for the County. However, both were under the directorship of the same individual. At that time the health department operated a children's home and a full service city hospital (Handley Memorial) named after former Director of Health, Dr. Handley.

During the '50s and well into the '60s, public health was very preventive-focused, and the role of environmental health was in the process of morphing from being just sanitation-based to the much broader scope of air, water, housing, vector control and environmental epidemiology, along with strong environmental laboratory support.

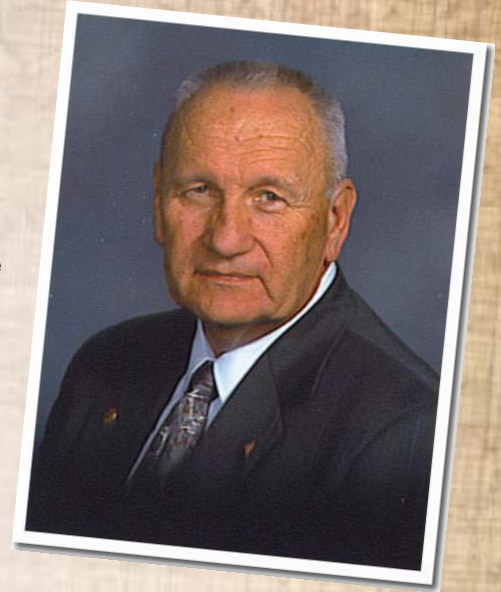
In addition to performing traditional public health nursing activities such as TB, VD and immunizations, nurses were involved in community outreach, health education, school health and other community health-related activities.

With the development of Medicaid, Medicare and the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], many changes faced public health. With the rapidly increasing use of antibiotics and major technological breakthroughs in both surgery and diagnostic medicine, the focus on preventive health services, along with public health dollars, shifted to curative medicine. For our community, those changes involved the transfer of the children's home to a private entity, and the closing of City Hospital while retaining out-patient clinical services for the medically indigent.

Curative medicine, while doing a very good job, soaked up preventive health dollars, yet everyone expected public health to fill the gap in providing preventive health services. At that time the EPA focus was less on human health effects and more on direct impacts on the environment. Although this new focus was long overdue, dollars were redirected from the public health approach of direct human health impacts to this new paradigm, resulting in further funding problems for public health.

In the long run, these changing events may have been a blessing in disguise. In response to these and other challenges, the late '70s saw the City and County merge both departments into one, along with construction of a new public health center, and it became the Springfield-Greene County Department of Public Health and Welfare.

To do what public health needed to do and without adequate funding brought on a new community leadership role for public health — that being community collaboration, consensus building, and partnerships for sustainability. In fact, this new paradigm resulted in what is now called the "core functions" and the "10 essential services of public health." And today, the EPA has a greater focus on human health aspects of environmental health. One might say, "It was back to the future for public health."



City-county health unit dedicated 3-28-77

Harold Bengsch (right) stands with others on March 28, 1977 as the new Springfield-Greene County Health Center is dedicated.
Source: *Springfield News-leader*

The future of public health is bright, provided public health professionals are committed to the task and challenges that lie ahead. Developments relating to the mapping of the human genome, nano-technology, establishing genetic/environmental interactions, designer pharmaceuticals, predictive biology, genetic engineering, and the list goes on, provides numerous leadership roles for public health to address major health threats as well as opportunities for quality-of-life improvements.

It is critical that public health leaders of today recognize and seize upon these opportunities. No other profession has the legacy of dedication to quality of life as does public health. A decision in public health very often affects the life of not just the individual but the well being of entire communities.

At the same time public health must never forget its roots and that real success is not measured in the mere presence or absence of disease. Rather it is measured by the overall physical, mental and social well-being of the society it serves.

-Harold K. Bengsch