

Leprosy in Iowa

By Dr. Ron Eckoff

(Now that I have your attention, please bear with me. This item is reprinted from the Tenth Biennial Report of the State Board of Health. Please note in particular the final two paragraphs.)

The following resolution was adopted by the House of Representatives March 3, 1898:

Be it resolved by the House, That the Secretary of the State Board of Health be requested to investigate reported cases of leprosy near Graettinger, Iowa, to confer with the members of the State Board of Health so far as practicable, and report to the House at the earliest possible date, and not later than March 13th, with recommendations as to such legislation as he considers advisable.

In compliance therewith the Secretary made a personal investigation of the case and made to the House the following report. Some blood, scales, and exudate from the subject were furnished Dr. Eli Grimes, the bacteriologist of the Board, and the result of his examination fully confirms the diagnosis of leprosy:

Hon. J. H. Funk, speaker House of Representative Twenty-seventh General Assembly:

Dear Sir – In compliance with a resolution passed by the House of Representatives March 3rd, last, requesting me to investigate the facts as to alleged cases of leprosy near Graettinger, in Palo Alto county, and to report conditions found, and such recommendations as to legislation as may be desired necessary, I have the honor to report as follows:

I went to Graettinger March 8th, and was taken by Dr. Burdick to the residence of Mr. Peterson, in Long Island township, Palo Alto county, six miles due west of Graettinger. I found in the person of his daughter, Miss Carrie Peterson, aged nineteen years, a typical case of leprosy in an advanced stage. There can be no mistake whatever in the character of the disease. The mother died in a leper hospital in Bergen, Norway. She had been a leper two years when Carrie was born. She was taken from the home to the Bergen hospital when Carrie was two years old. Another older daughter was born to the same mother about two or three years before leprosy developed in the mother. I did not see this daughter. She was away from home. I was told she was in good health, and showed no signs of the disease. I saw a recent photograph of her and there were no indications of the disease as shown by that.

Mr. Peterson is a farmer, is in good circumstances, has a very good frame two-story house, everything neat and clean. Carrie occupies a

room upstairs. She does not eat with other members of the family, and none enter her room, not any dishes, clothing, towels, etc., used by her are used by any other members of the family. She does not leave the farm, and thus is quite well isolated.

The disease in the case of Carrie, I think, from the conditions now present, will terminate fatally within one year, or eighteen months at most. (Note Carrie died at her home in October 1899)

I do not think any special legislation is necessary, as the State Board of Health, through the local board, can sufficiently protect the public health.

While leprosy is an incurable and most loathsome disease, it is but feebly contagious – so much so that several eminent authors doubt that it is at all so. Carefully collected statistics show while in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa there were a few years ago one hundred and thirty cases of leprosy, there are now in the whole northwest not to exceed twenty. There has been no segregation, and this dying out of the disease is because the conditions are in no way favorable for its propagation.

A special meeting of the State Board of Health will be held March 24th, when this subject will be laid before the members for such official action as they may deem proper.

I may be pardoned in this connection for stating that tuberculosis is a disease about which there is no question as to its contagiousness. More than five thousand persons die in Iowa from this largely preventable disease to every one that dies from leprosy! – more die from tuberculosis in a single day than has from leprosy since the state has been in existence.

Would it not be more appropriate for our General Assembly to seriously consider the best ways and means of stamping out, or at least restricting the spread of this great white plague that is a menace to all our homes?

-- J. F. Kennedy.

Post Script:

Following submission of this article, Dr. Eckoff researched additional details related to J.F. Kennedy's report. By reviewing records at the State Law Library, he learned that when he submitted his report, Dr. Kennedy also reported his expenses. The Legislature indicated they had no means to pay the expenses. The expenses were: Rail fare to Graettinger via Goldfield \$ 5.15, Dinner at Eagle Grove \$.50, Rail fare to Des Moines via Livermore \$ 4.94.