

1924: The New Iowa Public Health Association Dr. Ronald Eckoff

The Commissioner of Public Health issued a call to the Health Officers of the eighteen largest cities in Iowa to attend a conference on January 13, 1926 at the State House.

On May 13, 1926, at the second meeting of the Iowa Municipal Health Officers Association, the decision was made to reorganize and "take the name of the Iowa Public Health Association. The purpose of this reorganization being that the new organization might include all health workers in the state." The same day a constitution and by-laws were adopted. The purpose of the association was "to safeguard and promote the personal and public health of the residents of Iowa." There was considerable discussion on the advisability of adopting county health units as a satisfactory means of doing rural health work.

The next meeting was held in Council Bluffs on May 10, 1927. At the next meeting on May 7 8, 1928 in Cedar Rapids a motion was passed to endorse "the program of the State Board of Health in endeavoring to make the County Health Unit System permissible."

Dr. Steelsmith was the first president of the new organization, followed by Dr. Sugg. A.D. Hayes, Dr. Williams, Dr. Aldrich, and Dr. Woodburn also served as president.

Dr. Steelsmith was Health Officer for Dubuque in 1926, but by 1928 he was Deputy Commissioner of the State Health Department and in charge of the Division of Communicable Disease. In 1930 he became Commissioner after Dr. Albert's death.

Historian George Mills in his book *Looking in Windows* reports on one of Dr. Steelsmith's efforts to fight venereal disease. (The title, *Looking in Windows* refers to another public health related story in the book. It is about parents visiting their polio stricken children at Blank Hospital in Des Moines in 1948. Some had to bring ladders to see their children through the second floor windows.)

Dr. Steelsmith was concerned that the number of reported cases of syphilis and gonorrhea in Iowa had risen from 3,202 in 1930 to 5,031 in 1931. Dr. Steelsmith appealed to the American Social Hygiene Association in New York. An investigator spent three days in Des Moines. "In three days and three nights the investigator went to twenty-one brothels, met twenty-four prostitutes, talked to ten cab drivers, and eight hotel bellboys, visited twelve hotels, and was accosted by eleven street-walkers." "Often the investigator posed as a businessman who had just come to town and had decided to 'step out.' He got into brothels easily most of the time and used his various ingenious excuses to escape as soon as he had gotten the information he needed. He must have had a computer mind to remember the conversations and detail that he recorded for each visit." The report indicated prostitution was flagrantly practiced on the east side of Des Moines between the Des Moines River and the state capitol. Resorts (brothels) were much more scattered on the west side and there seemed to be a much greater fear of detection there. The investigator spent four days in other Iowa cities checking into the prostitution situation. "He found some in Cedar Rapids and Mason City, a little in Marshalltown, and said Waterloo was 'practically free of it.'"

"Health Commissioner Steelsmith received the report of more than 100 pages in November 1932. He avoided all publicity on it as he had promised. Exactly what he did with the information is unknown but it is likely he forwarded it to the Des Moines police and to the departments of other cities with a request for action."

Whether related or not, the reported cases of syphilis and gonorrhea declined from 5,122 in 1932 to 4,376 in 1933 and 3,420 in 1934. However the reported cases rose to 6,834 in 1936.

This article is a continuation of a series by IPHA to share our history.

The charter members who organized the Iowa Public Health Association on May 13, 1926 were:

Dr. D.C. Steelsmith, Dubuque
 Dr. H.R. Sugg, Clinton (Member State Board of Health)
 Dr. E.M. Williams, Oskaloosa (Member State Board of Health)
 Dr. C.W. Stewart, Washington
 Dr. H.L. Saylor, Des Moines (President State Board of Health)
 Dr. Don M. Griswold, Des Moines (Director State Laboratory)
 Dr. James W. Wallace, Des Moines (Deputy Commissioner State Health Department)
 Dr. William Woodburn, Boone
 Dr. A.L. Bryan, Muscatine
 Dr. M.J. Fitzpatrick, Mason City
 Dr. John Redmond, Cedar Rapids
 Dr. W.J. Connell, Dubuque
 Dr. J.F. Aldrich, Shenandoah
 T.J. Edmonds, Des Moines
 A.T. Lusty, Cedar Rapids
 Miss Chayer, Des Moines
 Lucy L. McMichael, Des Moines
 Charlotte Garrison, Des Moines
 A.D. Hays C.P.H., Sioux City (Member State Board of Health)

In the fall 2009 newsletter we introduced the "Great IPHA History Hunt." If you are related to any of the charter members, worked with them or know them, tell us your story! In addition if you have any IPHA pictures and stories to share from any point in time for our 85 years, be sure to send them to Jeneane Moody, IPHA Coordinator at iowapha@gmail.com

**Maria Scott and Jeneane Moody
 are the co-editors of Public
 Health Matters. To submit
 articles for the Spring issue of
 PHM, email Maria at
maria.o.scott@gmail.com before
 February 15, 2010.**