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MARION HOTOPP

Public Health

"Public Health encompasses those activities that are undertaken for the prevention of disease and the promotion of health which are primarily a community responsibility."—Wilson G. Smillie, *Preventive Medicine and Public Health*.

"Although we are becoming more aware of our problems and are making some progress toward their solution, we may as well face the fact that in the field of public health New Mexico is at least ten years behind most of the other states." This statement from the latest annual report of the New Mexico Department of Public Health provides a fairly realistic, but probably too optimistic appraisal of the relative status of public health in this state. We are probably more nearly twenty years behind some states.

A good public health program depends for the most part upon adequate well-trained personnel, adequate equipment and quarters and adequate travel funds in order to reach the people. In a state such as New Mexico where many areas have a very low per capita income, the situation is particularly difficult. The percentage of people needing help in understanding their health problems and in working out solutions is considerably higher than average, and funds available through taxation are below average.

New Mexico has the highest infant death rate in the United States. An appreciable percentage of infant deaths last year was due to communicable diseases which are largely preventable. New Mexico's tuberculosis case rate is the second highest in the country. The control of acute communicable disease still constitutes a serious problem in New Mexico. Infectious diseases which have been largely eliminated in other states still take their toll of lives in this state.

Marion Hotopp, District Health Officer, District One, New Mexico, has a B.A. from Mount Holyoke, an M.P.H. from Howard, and an M.D. from Cornell. She is certified in pediatrics and public health. "When Regional Medical Consultant for the U.S. Children's Bureau," she writes, "I had five states in region, including New Mexico. The first time I visited New Mexico, I decided I wanted to work here and came as soon as the minimum time I had agreed to work for the Children's Bureau was completed."

Aside from lack of funds, there are many factors which have hindered the progress of public health in our state.

New Mexico is large in size, but the population is small. Travel time required to serve the small scattered communities in most health districts is probably greater for New Mexico than any other state. Time spent in travel is time which cannot be used to provide services, but unless a certain number of home visits are made, particularly by public health nurses, instruction cannot fit the family situation.

The relatively low income of large segments and areas of our population is frequently associated with improper nutrition, insufficient medical care and insanitary living conditions. In addition, language and cultural differences in the state require a higher degree of skill in providing adequate health education.

All of the county health units within the state are inadequately staffed, and most are housed in quarters which make the suitable provision of basic health services extremely difficult. New Mexico's rapidly increasing population in some areas has accentuated this problem.

Yet, although New Mexico is presently behind many of the other states in public health, our rate of progress has been really remarkable. For example, a child born in New Mexico in 1949 could expect to live approximately 59 years, whereas children born today can expect to live, on an average, about 67 years. The infant death rate in New Mexico has dropped 59 per cent in the last ten years, while the maternal death rate has decreased 80 per cent. Over the years, there has been a continuous reduction in deaths from the communicable diseases. These improvements were the result, in good measure, of a better health education program and advances in preventive medicine.

Progress in public health cannot be measured alone in terms of life expectancy. However, there is every reason to believe that the same factors which have decreased maternal and infant death rates and increased life expectancy have prevented much sickness and disability.

Although the health department is the official agency charged by law with the promotion and protection of the public health, overall progress has been due to many factors, such as increased availability of physicians and dentists, improved and more accessible hospital facilities, advance in medical knowledge and application, the extension of health department services and higher general standards of living.

We have every reason to expect continued progress in public health. However, the rate of that progress will depend to a great extent on the willingness and capacity of the state to finance the necessary programs.