

The Old Foe Syphilis Strikes Again: Social Responses and Collective Mobilization

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See also Kosenko and Polianski, p. 1318.

Syphilis is an ancient sexually transmitted spirochetal infection that causes a wide variety of clinical outcomes, including severe disability and death.¹ At various times over the course of human history, syphilis has become so common in selected countries that it attracts great public attention. In this issue of *AJPH*, Kosenko and Polianski (p. 1318) review the use of unique communication tools to attract attention to syphilis in the first half of the 20th century in the USSR and the United States. They describe the use of stage plays called “Living Newspapers,” which the Federal Theater Project organized during the Great Depression in the United States.

The eponymous *Spirochete* Living Newspaper was launched in 1938 as part of a broader project to enhance public engagement in syphilis control. During this period, the United States was in the throes of a syphilis epidemic that affected approximately 1 of every 10 Americans.² A total of 63 600 Living Newspaper performances were organized on approximately 153 stages. For many people, this was likely the first

time that they had seen the word “syphilis” on a printed page and the first time that they had ever been to a live theater performance. The *Spirochete* Living Newspaper had two major components: one focused on biological aspects of syphilis (e.g., transmission, treatment, origins) and the other on social implications (e.g., the effect of syphilis on marriage).

The Seattle, Washington, *Spirochete* Living Newspaper organizers provided syphilis testing in the theater entryway, providing a concrete way to link the arts to public health programs. The Living Newspaper also drew on a whole-of-society approach that brought together artists, journalists, medical communities, and civil society groups. One local version of the Living Newspaper in Washington was sponsored by the Ladies Auxiliary of the King County Medical Society, which reserved a large block of tickets for their members.³ These multisectoral partnerships subsidized the price of tickets or made them free in many cities, making the performance available to all walks of life. This synergized with the large-scale

antisiphilic campaign orchestrated by US surgeon general Thomas Parran to mobilize communities against syphilis.² The campaigns encouraged people to talk about syphilis and stop the shame associated with having syphilis and being tested for it. At the same time, the 1930s campaign to confront syphilis was certainly compromised by the lack of available, affordable, and effective treatment. The subsequent use of penicillin to cure people with syphilis starting in 1941 and the mass production of a pure form for clinical use was critical to the success of public health interventions.⁴

The Living Newspaper approach to widespread syphilis awareness resembles other public strategies in which syphilis control was heavily prioritized and collectivized. The original Living Newspaper was a product of the Soviet Republic and was transplanted to US soil under the direction of Hallie Flanagan. Her initial impressions of the Soviet Union directly informed her subsequent Vassar Experimental Theater and the later US government-funded Federal Theater Program. In addition, the virtual elimination of syphilis in China was a centerpiece of the early years of Mao Zedong’s leadership.⁵ Similar to those of the Soviet Union and the United States, Chinese propaganda and public education were scaled up and disseminated broadly throughout the population. Syphilis was blamed on foreign interests (“the running dogs of capitalism”), and extensive syphilis screening and treatment were mandatory and patriotic. The push toward syphilis control was also explicitly a class struggle. Red-light brothel districts were dismantled and female sex workers were given penicillin.⁶

Although Kosenko et al. describe unique communication strategies in a time before television and the Internet, there are several interesting parallels between the 1930s Living Newspapers and modern syphilis control efforts. First, Living Newspapers were perhaps the first campaign to suggest that knowing about syphilis was not only an obligation of high-risk individuals but also the responsibility of the entire community. Although the extent to which this entirely destigmatized syphilis testing is not well understood, this likely decreased barriers to syphilis testing among a large number of people considered at low risk. Collective community responses to counter syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections have been developed in the past three years, including crowdsourcing open calls⁷ and participatory design-nathons.⁸ Greater attention to collective mobilization to support syphilis control at the community level is needed.

Second, the 1930s democratization of syphilis knowledge through low-cost or free theater performances suggests how designing for marginalized groups can help reach them over time. Third, the social justice mission of the original Living Newspapers is echoed in research and programs focused on health equity related to syphilis. The problem of syphilis is deeply embedded in intersectional power differences that require attention to social justice. Finally, syphilis has not disappeared; there has been a worldwide explosion of new cases, including a dramatic increase in congenital syphilis cases.^{9,10}

Despite China's remarkable virtual elimination of syphilis in the 1960s, the country could not sustain its success.⁹ In the United States, there were 2148 (57 cases per 100 000 live births)

congenital syphilis cases in 2021.¹⁰ And syphilis prevalence has increased in many other countries.¹¹ The resurgence of syphilis has not gone unnoticed, and many communities have marshaled 21st-century communications tools in public campaigns to increase testing and treatment. Online platforms have been used to promote syphilis self-testing approaches in which kits are mailed to individuals, who can then test themselves and interpret their results. Digital crowdsourcing strategies have been used to develop public health interventions focused on increasing syphilis test uptake.⁷ This suggests the importance of public engagement to promote understanding of syphilis within communities and spur testing.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

J. D. Tucker reports no potential conflicts of interest. M. S. Cohen is cochair of the HIV Prevention Trials Network and COVID-19 Prevention Network, which is supported by National Institutes of Health research funding, and serves on an advisory board for Aerium, Atea, and GSK.

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