

PUBLIC HEALTH

Public Health And The Home

By

H. D. Ten Brink,

Director of Public Health, World Neighbours Project

'Health and the Home' is a very broad subject, far too extensive to deal with in any comprehensive way in a short article. The focus of a public health programme is the *Home*. By training and orientation and personal conviction I am committed to this principle. The focus of public health is the person as a whole and the family as a unit. "The person as a whole and the family as a unit" sounds like a good slogan for selling something or a catchy phrase. To some it may be a truism. I should like to explain just a little what it means in a public health programme.

To begin with the person as a whole and the family as a unit stimulates our imagination to go a little further and think of the family in terms of the community, the community, as a nation and the nations a community of nations, the world. And indeed in the world we live in, the health problems of one nation have become the problems of other nations.

But to scale ourselves down to a more specific aspect of health, I should like to give you a very brief and far from comprehensive outline of what a public health programme is.

Public health focuses its attention on prevention rather than giving first emphasis on cure, although almost all workers in health are recognizing that prevention and cure go hand in hand. In actual working practice it is not possible to separate prevention and cure. We are recognizing that it is artificial to think of prevention and cure as separate and distinct. When people are concerned over

immediate and sometimes urgent health needs they have no energies left over to think about long range plans of prevention, which may seem in any case something remote. There is not a more important aspect of preventive health than nutrition with all its effect on growth and development. But where there is acute illness in the home we shall have trouble getting a receptive ear to talk about choice of diet, meal planning, conservation of food value and home gardening, important as these subjects are.

The preventive motive carries through in the community aspect of health and includes safe and sanitary water supply. Control food supply and food handlings, disposal of commercial and private waste, sanitation and public safety.

Maternal & Child Health is a most important part of public health. In India this aspect of health probably receives the major portion of public attention. It is said that the Infant and Maternal death rates, especially the infant mortality rate, is a rough index of the state of health of any nation. Rightly so, there is a good deal of attention in India, and in all other countries of the world, to the health of mothers and babies. But it doesn't stop there. The modern public health programme is concerned with the growth and development of the child from infancy to maturity. The pre-school child in interim during which he is making the transition from a diet which is largely milk to being able to assimilate an adult diet, has certain specific nutritional needs. Just as he has needs in his development of habits and attitudes. Mental hygiene and child

guidance become a part of the public health concern. Nursery school education has something to contribute as a co-worker in the life of the child.

During childhood attention is given to prevention of disease by immunization as well as other means of protection which are a part of the sanitation work of the health programme.

If special conditions as communicable diseases, crippling diseases, hearing and eye defects are detected and treated early in life, there is a great saving in lives and suffering. It is in the home where these conditions can be detected and it lies finally with the home to see that early treatment is given. Therefore it is the duty of the public health worker to include health education in the programme so that families can be informed about health and so that need for treatment can be interpreted to parents.

Some diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria depend on an educated public for their eradication. We have the scientific knowledge to blot out tuberculosis in one generation if it were effectively applied. The gap between knowledge and application is great. With the result that there are lakhs of sufferers from tuberculosis in the world and in India alone, the cost of loss of income and man-hours of work is staggering.

The aim of public health is a healthy mind in a healthy body. The WHO defines health as "*a state of mental and physical well-being and not only the absence of disease and infirmity.*" Mental disease is on the increase in the complex world in which we live. In considering the person as a whole we must consider this problem dealing with man's emotional needs. Mental hygiene with its emphasis on prevention of

mental diseases is not new but it is an increasingly important aspect of the public health.

Even this brief and far from complete outline of public health may sound too high pitched and may give us a feeling that it is far from attainment. This programme is in brief an outline of the idea of public health as visualized by the health worker, not only in the so-called advanced countries but in India as well. All efforts are adapted to local conditions, keeping a flexible and dynamic approach.

The public health worker can never do the job alone. There is a responsibility for every citizen. There is something each person can do to further the health of his family.

The first is to acquaint himself with basic facts about health and this implies some discretion in getting his facts from reliable sources. The responsibility of every person is to practise the health knowledge he already has. There is always a wide gap between what we know and what we do.

Sickness strikes at the foundation of the home; whether it is illness of the wage earner with loss of income, or the worry and complexity of illness to the child, the subject of health in the home seems to be a particularly fitting part of this Christian Home Festival. Our attitudes and behaviour regarding our health have far more to do with our religion and culture than most of us readily imagine.

As a public health nurse with a special interest in mental hygiene, I have found that in the Christian home we have a dynamic concept of health as we acknowledge our responsibility regarding this temporal body, the Temple of the Holy Spirit which God has given us.

