



COUNTY HEALTH MATTERS

Weekly Column:

April 05, 2004

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What is Public Health?

By Lisa Graham & Lu Ann Bumgarner

April 5-11, 2004 is National Public Health Week. In the 1988 Institute of Medicine report "The Future of Public Health" public health was defined as "organized community efforts aimed at the prevention of disease and promotion of health". This definition tells us what public health is but not what public health does.

Public health is often confused with healthcare for the poor. Public health efforts are not health services for select groups of people. Public health attempts to minimize threats to the public as a whole. Infectious diseases, environmental hazards, poor sanitation, and other problems are addressed through education, restaurant and septic tank inspections, disease tracking, and other methods.

The government's role in protecting public health dates back 200 years. The Marine Hospital Service became the first federal public health program in 1798. It provided for the care of sick and disabled seamen. The Public Health Service Commissioned Corps was set up in 1889 to provide a mobile force of health experts to help prevent the spread of diseases. There have been many changes in the realm of public health since its conception in 1798.

The Warren County Health Department began providing services in July of 1993 for the purpose of overseeing the public health of the county. Many of the activities of the health department are unknown to the average person because they are done "behind the scenes". One example of this is emergency planning for events such as disease outbreaks, natural disasters along with biological or chemical events, and any other situation that might put the citizens of Warren County at risk. Disease tracking is another good example of a behind the scenes activity the health department does to protect the county.

Have you ever received a flu shot, eaten in a restaurant, had your water tested, or heard a public health broadcast? People may not be aware of some of the services offered through the health department. Immunizations are a very important part of disease prevention and are given at the health department through a program funded by the federal government. Public health and safety is one of the department's utmost concerns therefore many educational pamphlets are available at no cost to the public. Another service that the department offers is certified copies of birth and death certificates for persons born or deceased in the state of Missouri.



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For more information about what your local public health department does for you call 636-456-7474 or visit the Warren County Health Department web site at <http://warren.lphamo.org>.