

5-15-1922

Address of Percival P. Baxter, Governor of Maine on the Public Health Delivered at the State Public Health Meeting, Portland, May 15, 1922 : Under the Auspices of the American College of Surgeons

Percival P. Baxter

ADDRESS

PERCIVAL P. BAXTER
GOVERNOR OF MAINE

on

The Public Health

delivered at the

State Public Health Meeting

Portland, May 15, 1922

Under the auspices of the
American College of Surgeons.



Mr. President and Fellow Citizens of Maine:—

When the Maine members of the American College of Surgeons invited me to give this address of welcome I accepted because of my deep interest in the health of the people of this State, and because I wished to show my appreciation of the unselfish and public spirited efforts of those who arranged for this meeting. These professional men, realizing that happiness and usefulness are founded upon good health, desire to help their fellow citizens attain it. With good health we can do the work of the world and can enjoy the pleasant things of life, while without it we are hampered in our usefulness and enjoyment, and lower the general physical average of the community.

HISTORY

Public Health is of paramount importance, and surprising as it may seem is a subject that, comparatively speaking, has but recently been given the prominent position to which it is entitled. The world for centuries regarded disease as inevitable, while today much of it is held to be preventable. Great plagues periodically swept over Europe and Asia and but little effort was made to check them. These plagues often were regarded as punishments deliberately inflicted by the Almighty upon his erring children, whereas in fact they were brought upon men by themselves as the result of their ignorance and superstition, and their transgressions of the laws of health and sanitation.

When it is realized what great advances have been made within the past 50 years

there is reason to be hopeful for the future, for it is admitted that more progress in public health matters has been made in that brief period than was made during the 500 years preceding it. In the year 1864 the city of New York was threatened with a serious cholera epidemic and the mayor, on being urged to convene the board of health so that steps might be taken to control the disease, refused to do so replying that in his opinion "the board of health was more dangerous to the city than the cholera." It also is a matter of interest that in New York in those days most of the local health officers were saloon keepers, but today thanks to the Maine law, supplemented by the Volstead Act, the saloon keeper is rapidly becoming an extinct species in Maine, and it is no longer necessary to call upon that class of citizens to enforce the health laws.

INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY

The health of the public cannot rise above the general health average of those individuals who compose the public. The individual must be made to realize that not only does he owe it to himself to be sound in body and mind, but also that he is under a direct obligation to be free of disease so he will not endanger the lives of his fellow citizens. All have the right to insist that their neighbors shall not menace them. Once this double responsibility is brought home to each individual the public health question will be near solution. An awakened and enlightened public sentiment is needed and this can be stimulated by co-operation between the

various boards of health and the several associations of public spirited citizens who have the public welfare at heart.

It is not necessary, nor would it be desirable, for the State to assume responsibility for the medical treatment of the individual, unless some unusual circumstance warranted this being done; nor should the State prescribe the school of medicine through which treatment is to be given. The rights of the individual must be protected, while at the same time he must be held responsible for his exercise of those rights.

PUBLIC HEALTH OF MAINE

The State of Maine should be the healthiest of all the 48 states. Its unequalled climate, its preponderance of rural population, its unlimited supply of pure water, the contour of its land for proper drainage, and the intelligence of its people should make it easy for Maine to lead the nation. This State is a healthy state, but even so there is room for improvement, and a wide field exists for the activities of interested citizens who seek to aid in improving living conditions. The good points should not be exaggerated nor should the weaker ones be overlooked, but Maine people at times have neglected their opportunities in health as in certain other important matters.

The function of the State Department of Health is to clean up dangerous areas where disease is found or is likely to breed, to protect the sources of water and milk supplies, to gather vital statistics, to aid physicians in laboratory analyses, and in general to set high standards for the guidance of

citizens and municipalities. In addition to the Department of Health the State is fortunate in having the Public Health Council, which co-operates with and advises the State Department and renders valuable service to the several municipalities. It is not more laws that are needed in Maine, health or otherwise, but more observance of and more respect for law.

STATE WORK

Few citizens realize the extent to which the State is engaged in health and hospital work. To carry on the Health Department the last Legislature appropriated \$200,000 and in addition to this \$300,000 more will be spent in protecting the milk supplies of cities and towns. The State Auditor informs me that the Legislature appropriated a total of \$3,259,031.20 for State Hospitals; \$2,589,974.61 for the Insane and Tubercular, and \$669,056.59 for the Feeble Minded. By January 1, 1923 there will be more than 2600 beds in these State Institutions and the number is being increased yearly.

The last Legislature appropriated \$346,500 to aid 25 private hospitals, which have 1245 beds and represent an investment of over \$2,000,000. In the State there are also 43 licensed maternity hospitals with 225 beds. A new dormitory is about to be completed at the Feeble Minded Home in Pownal, and it is the fixed policy of the State to build additional dormitories at that institution until all the unfortunate defectives of this class are segregated and under the care of the State.

No finer work is done within the State than that of its public and private hospitals, whose

purpose is to relieve suffering and prolong human life. The good that is accomplished cannot be measured. People who live in cities where hospital facilities abound often take them as a matter of course, and fail to appreciate what they mean to the community. Even though some of these hospitals are not as modern as might be wished and though improvements are needed, splendid work is being done with the equipment at their command. Special mention should be made of the unselfish service of the trustees of these institutions without whose untiring efforts this work could not be carried on.

I have visited out of the way places in this State where hospitals are unknown, and thus have been brought face to face with the need that exists for them. I recall a small town in Northern Maine where until a year or two ago there was no hospital. Men injured in the rough work of the woods were taken by team or sled to the railroad and then carried in a baggage car 50 or 100 miles to a hospital in a distant town. Today it is different, for there is a small but good hospital in that village and when accidents occur the injured man is hurried to as clean and wholesome an institution as can be found in the State and immediate treatment is given him. It is difficult for some citizens to realize what a hospital like this means to that community, far away from the large centers of population, and the public spirited men and women responsible for its establishment deserve the gratitude of their fellows.

I wish the State was in a position to increase its aid to hospitals, for although we have about 3500 hospital beds in Maine, excluding

the Pownal Home, more could be used to great advantage. It often has been stated that the standing of a community can be judged by the number and condition of its churches and its schools and I believe it would be well to include in this test its hospitals.

The work of these hospitals, both State and private, is carried on by doctors and nurses who stand high in their chosen professions. Recently I attended the opening of the new Nurses Home in Lewiston, and wish that every hospital in Maine might have such a home as a part of its regular equipment.

The nurses who graduate from our Maine institutions and who are entitled to wear the coveted pin bearing the letters "R.N." are well trained and can be relied upon in any emergency. Patients sometimes rebel against the judgment of the doctor, but it is rare that anyone dares question the authority of the nurse!

CHILDREN

Public health work among the children of the State is of great importance. School buildings must be inspected periodically so that sanitary conditions shall prevail at all times. Medical examination of children, under such reasonable restrictions as will not interfere with or lessen the responsibility of parents, will tend to make the rising generation stronger and more useful than the preceding one. The State already has examined 130,000 school children, 11,000 of whom were found to have defective vision and 7,000 defective hearing.

It sometimes seems hardly worth while to devote much time in teaching adults how to keep well, for many of them are past reforming, and most of them feel they know more about doctoring than do the doctors themselves! Special attention should however be given to the care of children for they respond to every effort made in their behalf. The State Department of Education reports that 50 nurses are employed in the public schools, and that there are 100 school physicians within the State. The sanitary conditions of the schools are constantly being improved, and a law becomes effective in 1924 which provides that State Aid for schools can be withheld from a city or town whose authorities fail to comply with the Health Regulations of the State School Department. In schools of modern construction provision is made for warming the luncheons of children who travel long distances to school, and already 700 schools have installed the equipment. There are 41 physical directors who teach both teachers and children and who are helping to lay the foundations for the health of future citizens. There are 50,000 children in 104 towns of the State engaged in the School Health Crusade and I want this number to be increased to 150,000. Those who live in the cities are not familiar with this Crusade movement, which aims to teach children, especially the little ones, to take care of themselves and to form habits of cleanliness and health. This work is of real value.

I recently was present when the prize health banner was presented to a class of 14 children in a Northern Aroostook town, and on that occasion the 14 little ones sat proudly

upon the platform in the largest hall in Fort Fairfield. They had carried out the details of the Health Crusade more faithfully than any other class of children in all the New England States. You can imagine how happy that young teacher was to have her children, averaging less than 10 years of age, sitting on the stage beside her, with their faces shining, and all eager to receive the coveted banner. The habits formed by the children in this Crusade will benefit them throughout their lives.

It really is worth while working with and for the children, for when they err it is because they know no better. With the grown-ups it is different for they ought themselves to know enough to keep well, and many of them are in better health than they should expect to be, considering the lives they lead! Almost everybody, however, transgresses upon occasion. It often has been facetiously remarked that Americans might adopt the Chinese practice of paying the doctor as long as his patients are in good health. American doctors are not to be criticized for declining to enter into such a contract, for far too many Americans seem to think nothing of their health, and it would take even more than a Chinese doctor to keep some of these people well!

SHEPPARD-TOWNER MATERNITY BILL

Congress recently passed the Sheppard-Towner Bill for the promotion of the "welfare and hygiene of maternity and infancy." Under this Bill \$5,000 is given the State of Maine for this work, and an additional sum of \$1,732.66 is made available provided the State appropriates an equal amount. The State Legislature must accept the provisions of the act, but the Governor may temporarily do so until the Legislature convenes.

The Executive Councilors and myself have received communications from citizens who favor the acceptance of this Act as well as from those who oppose it. The matter is of importance to the State, and the Governor and Council are of the opinion that a hearing, similar to those held by Legislative committees, should be held so that citizens may present their views for and against the acceptance of the Act.

At the Council meeting on Thursday May eleventh, this matter was under discussion and it was the unanimous opinion that no action be taken until the sentiment of the people of the State is obtained.

The general purposes of the Bill meet with the approval of the Governor and Council, but some doubt was raised as to the constitutionality of the Act and as to the advisability of allowing the Federal Government to undertake maternity and child welfare work within the State. Apart from the Sheppard-Towner Act it may be advisable for the State to undertake this work upon its own responsibility. The hearing will be at the State House in Augusta, the date to be announced later.

MOTHERS' AID AND DEPENDENT AND NEGLECTED CHILDREN

The State already has assumed the care of 1374 Dependent and Neglected Children for whose support an appropriation of \$262,000 was made. This work has increased beyond the expectations of the Legislative Budget Committee and it will require more than \$400,000 to properly support these children until the Legislature meets again. The Governor and Council has provided the necessary funds and no case recommended by the State Board of Charities will go unprovided for.

The Mothers' Aid that is granted by the State is now being given to 471 mothers, in whose families there are 1657 children under the age of sixteen years. This is splendid work, its purpose being to aid dependent mothers in keeping together their families. The financial problem of Mothers' Aid is similar to that of the Dependent and Neglected Children, and where \$185,000 was appropriated for this purpose by the Legislature it will require more than \$300,000 to take care of those cases that have been passed upon and approved by the State Board. In this matter also the Governor and Council have provided the necessary funds so that no worthy case will be uncared for.

When the citizens of the State realize that the State is caring for 471 mothers and 3031 children they will understand the extent of the work the State is doing. This social welfare work by the State is increasing yearly but no better investment of its funds can be made.

AMERICAN COLLEGE OF SURGEONS

The members of the medical profession who come in contact with suffering are doing their best to lessen and relieve it. The motive that prompted the surgeons of Maine to arrange this meeting is entirely unselfish, and they are animated solely by public spirit of the highest order. They seek to arouse the individual to his health opportunities and responsibilities and this evening we are to hear messages which should be heeded. People are placed in this world to work, and they cannot do their best work unless possessed of good health. You and I are component parts of this community, and whenever we are ill we lower the general average of the public health.

It gives me pleasure to welcome the distinguished speakers of the evening to the State of Maine, and to welcome this audience to this hall. The speakers will receive an inspiration from this splendid gathering, and I am sure those of you who are here will receive inspiration from the speakers. The people of Maine are in reality members of one big family, and all should work together for the common good.

It is fitting for the Governor of the State to be here this evening; for as I have said the health of its citizens is of paramount importance. Nature has lavished her blessings upon the people of Maine, and every effort on their part to take advantage of these gifts will bring rich rewards. A state from which has been driven all needless and preventable diseases would be an ideal one, and that is what the State of Maine should be.