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Public Health: A Global Effort that Protects and Promotes the Health of Communities



John Kerry - Keynote speaker at

Public health addresses the health of *populations* by contrast with medical health care, which focuses on treatment of *individuals*. The Institute of Medicine defines the mission of public health as "fulfilling society's interest in assuring conditions in which people can be healthy. ..."

In December HSIS librarians gained a fascinating insight into this important aspect of health services through a workshop at the University of Washington. We learned who the public health workers are, what they really do, what competencies

they require, and what the National Library of Medicine is doing to support the public work force. Sally then attended the huge annual gathering of the American Public Health Association in Philadelphia, and learned more about public health issues including the challenges, frustrations, and triumphs of this dedicated group whose work is often far from glamorous, but which lays the foundation for the health of individuals.

Public health is an amazing mix of science, action, research, policy, advocacy and government, working together to improve the health of communities through health education, promotion, research, and disease prevention strategies! Sally saw all this and more at APHA: research on Atrazine, a widely used herbicide that triggers sex changes and tumors in birds, fish, frogs and mammals; a resolution in support of Alaska's dental health aid therapist program; John Kerry describing his proposed Kids First Bill to bring health insurance to the 11 million children in American presently not covered, while anti-Iraq War demonstrators paraded huge banners through the aisles and hecklers shouted from the floor; a scary discussion on the public health consequences of "sequestered science"; a contentious session with FDA and Health Canada's Health Protection Branch personnel on drug safety after Vioxx; and a heart-wrenching first-hand account of the New Orleans Dept of Health's response to Katrina. Obviously public health is at work everywhere!

The core disciplines of public health are biostatistics, epidemiology, environmental health, behavioral health and promotion, and health services administration. Others are occupational health and safety, maternal and child health, dental public health, preventive medicine, biomedical and lab practice, public health nursing, nutrition and international public health. You'll find public health professionals in academic institutions, tribal agencies, healthcare organizations, private and non-profits as well as in large businesses.

To truly appreciate the impact of public health efforts, check out the Ten Great Public Health Achievements in the U.S. over the last 100 years ...

- Vaccination
- Motor-vehicle safety
- Safer workplaces
- Control of infectious diseases
- Decline in deaths from coronary heart disease and stroke
- Safer and healthier foods
- Healthier mothers and babies
- Family planning
- Fluoridation of drinking water
- Recognition of tobacco use as a health hazard

During this period the average lifespan of Americans has lengthened by more than 30 years - 25 of which are attributable to public health efforts! ² Just imagine what a different world we would live in without this work!

Please take time to explore the links below to share some of the treasures we have discovered in this arena, and remember, HSIS can also assist you with your public health information needs.

Resources

1. Public Health Data Standards Consortium, Glossary <http://www.phdatastandards.info/knowresources/tutorials/glossary.htm>
2. Ten Great Public Health Achievements — United States, 1900-1999. <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00056796.htm>
3. GIDEON: a web-based information system for diagnosis, epidemiology, therapy and microbiology of infectious disease worldwide. Contact us to register for access within Alaska.
4. Partners in Information Access for the Public Health Workforce. <http://phpartners.org/>
5. Rx for Survival: A Global Health Challenge (Nov. 2005) PBS series which examines critical, worldwide threats from old diseases and bizarre new ailments resistant to modern medicine. [DVD on order for our library]
6. Competencies for providing essential public health services. Council on Linkages between Academia and Public Health Practice. http://www.trainingfinder.org/competencies/list_ephs.htm
7. Northwest Center for Public Health Practice: a web portal for public health practitioners. <http://healthlinks.washington.edu/nwcp/ncph/>