

A Half Century of Public Health

Excerpted from: Stephen Smith, "A Half Century of Public Health: Stephen Smith's response to a toast to him at a dinner held in his honor, The Semicentennial Banquet," *Am J Public Health* 12 (1922):3–6.

MR. TOASTMASTER, MEMBERS of the American Public Health Association, Honored President, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

... The tribute which your President, in behalf of the Association, has paid to me has moved me to the very depths of my being. It is a tribute to the accomplishments of the whole Association, through the entire fifty years of its career, rather than to me personally, although I accept it as my own. . . .

All I can say is a simple "Thank You." In all my career no honor has come to me that I will cherish more than this. I regard it as an act of a gracious Providence that I have the privilege of attending and participating in the celebration of these quite unique anniversaries.

To attend the semicentennial anniversary of the Public Health Association and my own approaching centennial, at one and the same time, is an event not hitherto recorded.

Few, if any, of my associates in the great struggle which gave to New York City the Metropolitan Health Law and to the world the American Public Health Association are still living, but "their works do follow them."

The health law and the Public Health Association, united as they were in their primary functions of establishing scientific

sanitation, planted the tree whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. I may say with Job's messengers, "I only am escaped alone to tell thee." New York City, then recorded as one of the healthiest cities of the civilized world, took the initiative steps in introducing scientific civic sanitation. The code of health ordinances which the metropolitan boards created is unrivaled. The results of its operations in reducing the death-rate were simply incredible. The health commissioner characterized it as "tremendous."

The death-rate gradually fell from 38 per cent, as it was when I began, to 12 in the 1,000 population, a saving of 70 per cent of the lives formerly sacrificed. But this is not all that the new system is accomplishing in conserving the public health of New York City, for only recently the health commissioner announced that the annual death-rate for a certain week had been as low as 8 per 1,000 of the population, which is not only a tremendous result, but it places New York City second, if not first, among the healthiest cities of over a million population in the civilized world.

These officially authenticated facts suggest new and important questions which will confront the managers of the Association as it begins its next half century. The steady fall of the death-rate, until it has nearly reached the vanishing

point, suggests the possibility of its passing that point. What a tremendous result! A city of six millions population without a death! Is such a result possible? Evidently this question must be answered in the next half century of the life of this Association.

It is interesting to notice that the tremendous decrease in the death-rate occurred during the increase of the population of the city from one to six millions. How completely does this fact controvert the recent public statement of a prominent clergyman of this city that the "nerve-racking life of New York is not conducive to health and longevity." The very opposite of this statement proves to be true. It is among the people most engaged in the nerve-racking activities of business that we find vigorous health. Few, if any, persons die of too much activity, while thousands lose health and life by the slowly disinter-grating process of idleness.

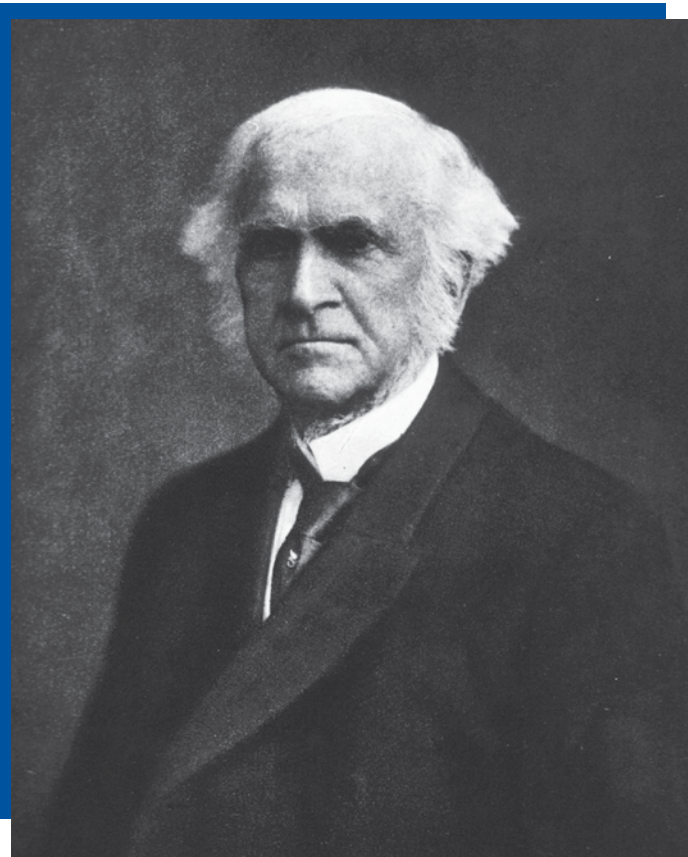
The most important feature of our celebration of the semicentennial of the Public Health Association centers in the record which the second semicentennial can, or possibly will, make in view of the great accomplishments of the first half. From a somewhat careful review of the situation, I anticipate that the second fifty years of activity of the Public Health Association will excel the first in its life-saving record.

This opinion is based on the quite universal movement among the people to encourage all forms of organization for the protection and promotion of the public health. The child-welfare societies are saving the babies even from their prenatal state through babyhood. Childhood in its development is becoming more and more subject to expert supervision at every stage. The life extension societies and rural clinics are subjecting every grade of the people, and at every age, whether sick or well, to rigid diagnostic examinations to discover incipient disease and anticipate treatment in its early stages and most curable period. The domestic pestilences, measles, scarlet fever, whooping cough, are prevented by serum therapy. The New York City sanitary officials are proposing to prevent all preventable diseases. These are but a few of the evidences of the remarkable interest of the people in the public health all along the line, from babyhood to old age. Even old age is classified as a disease by the great scientist, Metchnikoff, of the Pasteur Institute of Paris.

Perhaps the most important impending event favorably affecting the public health in the next half century will be the proposed reorganization of our system of medical education. The great universities of this country have now mutually decided to reorganize their medical schools on the basis of scientific precision hitherto unknown. Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Pennsylvania and Chicago are raising endowment funds for that purpose, incredible in their

amounts. Graduates from these schools will have a far higher qualification for the duties of practical and preventive medicine than have hitherto been known. Sanitary officials will be of the highest grade of qualification, and the great medical profession will cooperate in the enforcement of preventive measures in the homes of the people. A most effective measure in the prevention of crime, disease and human suffering is the prohibition law, rigidly enforced, by which alcohol is relegated to its proper place as a medicine, to be used only on the restricted prescription of physicians. Though not yet thoroughly enforced, we are beginning to hear of the marked diminution of crime, insanity and violence, hitherto due to the use of alcohol as a beverage. In a few years of strict enforcement of prohibition I look for a tremendous diminution of crime, sickness and death-rates.

One of the most important and far-reaching public-health measures for the future is the standardization of the health value of every variety of human food, and precise directions as to their uses in health and disease. Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, of the Battle Creek Sanitarium, in his monthly journal, *Good Health*, has been a pioneer in giving the people such accurate familiarity with the special forms of ordinary foods that they are able to adapt foods to their proper daily uses. I learn, also, that there are a score of women's magazines with a combination monthly circulation of fifteen million copies each issue which prints much



authoritative and expert food and dietetic advice for their readers. "As a man is what he eats," this knowledge is already a powerful factor in promoting the public health. A century ago, this knowledge was unknown even to eminent specialists. . . .

In confirmation of the belief that this Association has awakened a remarkable interest in public health among the people of this and other countries, I may refer to the following personal experience:

In anticipation of this anniversary the *American Magazine* published a somewhat florid sketch of my life which attracted wide interest on account of my age

Stephen Smith.

Source. Courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Collection, History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine.

and profession, and I have been in daily receipt of letters from all parts of the country. Many wish to know the secret of my long life, what I eat at breakfast, dinner and supper; whether I drink tea and coffee; if I use tobacco, wines, alcoholic liquors, and what brand of each I recommend. The writers assume that I have reached my present age because of some special mode of living which they desire to adopt. It is interesting to notice what trivial matters worry people.

A lady cannot digest eggs: Advice: "Cut them out." Another cannot digest milk: Advice: "Drink much more milk." A Texan yawns too much: Advice: "Walk a mile, thus pumping dead air out of and fresh air into your lungs." A young woman has weak ankles: Advice: "Change your peg-heel and pointed-toe shoes for your grandmother's common sense shoes." etc., etc.

In view of these evidences of a great awakening of the people of the entire country to the importance of health and to the fact that it is their first duty to secure it, I would suggest that it is incumbent upon this Association to seize the opportunity of placing the public health on a more scientific basis. We have too long been content with the false code of the Mosaic law that limits life to 3-score years and ten, with a possibility of reaching 4-score years.. ..

We are living under entirely different conditions, with a basic principle of life fixed by the unalterable precision of science. Biology teaches that the normal and potential life of man is one hundred years; that every child born is adapted in physical construction and function to live a century. We must, therefore, infer

that, in the natural order of life, all deaths occurring at an earlier age are due to conditions existing which are not compatible with the construction and functions of the human organisms. In these scientific facts we find the present duties and opportunities of this Association. I submit, that on this Jubilee day, we should inaugurate the new era in life saving by moving forward thirty years, our standard for the length of life, and we should summon the sanitary officials and the people to rally round that standard, now permanently fixed by the immutable deductions of science.

Let us prepare a new standard of our work, detailing in simple language which all can understand, this gospel of lengthened life-life that suggests immortality....

Let us, then, at this most auspicious time, send our messengers into every nook and corner of the whole wide world, proclaiming in schools, churches and legislative halls, by word and press and film, this new scientific standard of long life.

Thus shall we fulfill our duties to the Public Health Association and make its centennial, fifty years hence, even more glorious with its achievement than this semicentennial celebration of its proud record of the past fifty years. (Prolonged applause.)

In the course of the evening letters from President Harding were read by Dr. Lee K. Frankel and Dr. Royal S. Copeland, of which the following are extracts:

In connection with the semicentennial meeting of the American Public Health Association, I have just learned that a dinner is to be given to Dr. Stephen

Smith, the only living survivor of the group which founded the Association, who, in his ninety-ninth year, is still taking an active interest in the work. Dr. Smith's own longevity record is certainly one calculated to impress the practicability of public-health enterprises.

I would be glad, if, at the dinner in his honor, you will extend my congratulations to him and best wishes that he may enjoy many more years of active usefulness.

It is with much satisfaction that I take the occasion to extend greetings to the American Public Health Association. My understanding is that it is the oldest of like organizations and nearly everybody knows something about the distinguished services it has rendered and the long list of eminent men that have been affiliated with its efforts. Through such work as it has so long conducted, there has been distinguished achievement on behalf of the public interest. Knowing that the work will be carried on, I want to record my wishes for the utmost measure of public cooperation and support in everything that it may undertake.

Very sincerely,
WARREN G. HARDING

Stephen Smith (1823-1922): Founder of the American Public Health Association

Jay H. Glasser, PhD, Elizabeth Fee, PhD, and Theodore M. Brown, PhD

AT THE AGE OF 98, STEPHEN

Smith attended the semicentennial banquet of the American Public Health Association, held in his honor at the Hotel Astor on November 16, 1921. A distinguished audience greeted Smith, and as part of the evening of celebration a medallion was presented to Smith. Written on the obverse of the Stephen Smith medallion was

a bust of Stephen Smith with wreath and oil lamp; and the inscription "FOUNDER AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH ASS'N STEPHEN SMITH, MD, LLD."

The inscription on the Reverse of the Medallion read

TO COMMEMORATE THE SEMICENTENNIAL MEETING OF THE AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION 1872-NEW YORK -1922 NOTEWORTHY BECAUSE OF THE PARTICIPATION OF ITS FOUNDER DR. STEPHEN SMITH BORN FEB. 19, 1823.¹

The program of after-dinner speeches was made particularly memorable by Smith's participation in it. The preceding text is an excerpt from his speech, along with a letter from President Warren G. Harding lauding Smith and read on that occasion.²

Smith was a remarkable man. His celebrated longevity marked him as the paragon of a healthy life; many sought his guidance as

to his lessons of longevity. And justifiably so, since considering that life expectancy at birth was then 41 years, he had already lived over two normal lifetimes for his days! He credited his longevity to a lifetime of hard work, beginning as a child on his family farm.

Born February 19, 1823, in New York State, the son of a cavalry officer in the Revolutionary War, Smith began his life in the year President James Monroe declared the Monroe Doctrine and the first steamship began to navigate the Mississippi River. He lived through the US Civil War and the closing of the American frontier, and founded the American Public Health Association (APHA) before the patenting of the telephone and radio.

Smith trained as a physician at the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University, and did his residency at Bellevue Hospital. Beyond treating his patients, he recognized that outbreaks of typhus and cholera were related to dreadful environmental conditions in New York City. He knew the city was under the political sway of the notorious Boss Tweed and Tammany Hall cronyism that turned a purposeful blind eye toward public hygiene.

During his formative professional years, three characteristics of Smith were always evident: he mobilized and enlightened citi-

zens, researched and backed his sanitary campaigns with evidence, and declared that the public's health required a well-organized public health system staffed with well-trained professionals. In 1865, Smith and other dedicated reformers produced the landmark report on the sanitary conditions in the city.³

Smith's dogged pursuit of advocacy with his fellow physicians led to the creation of the Metropolitan Health Board for New York City in 1866. Smith was appointed a commissioner of the board and served until 1875. With other visionaries, he saw the need for a national network to engage scientists, enlighten the public, and ignite civic support for public health. This vision came to fruition with the creation of the APHA in 1872.

Smith published a retrospective review in 1911 that is tellingly entitled *The City That Was*.⁴ He was not always correct in his portents of the future: for example, he reasoned that the human life span should be 100 years, and that this could be achieved through advances in public health and medicine by the hundredth anniversary of APHA. He also predicted that enlightened humankind would eliminate war. His predictions may not yet have been met, but his words and vision resonate, then and now. ■

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Contributors

J.H. Glasser chose the topic and drafted the biosketch, which E. Fee and T.M. Brown edited and approved. E. Fee chose and edited the selection, which was approved by J.H. Glasser and T.M. Brown.

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