Two Papers on Venereal Disease: Reflecting on Some Suggestions from the 1940 American Public Health Association Annual Meeting

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American Public Health Association Annual Meeting

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The role of the conference in academia and other professional disciplines is well established. Such events are used to disseminate research amongst scholars within a particular field, while allowing feedback from peers with similar interests. In medical circles, such events are used to address growing concerns for the wellbeing of the public. The American Public Health Association annually holds meetings to address issues affecting the general public. During their 69th annual meeting, a special session was held entitled “The Control of Venereal Diseases in a National Defense Program of the American Public Health Association.” This paper will analyze two of the papers presented as a part of this session to see how this particular issue came to be of concern, what medical authorities of the day had to say about venereal disease (VD), and what their assessments reveal about the wider culture in which they were operating.

1940 America was in the midst of a shaky economic recovery, while watching the ever increasing turmoil in Europe. By July, Hitler’s forces overran France, leaving Great Britain alone to stand against his advance. Italy’s entrance on the side of Nazi Germany all but ensured America’s eventual entrance into the war. Despite Roosevelt’s public statements about keeping the United States out of the war, General Headquarters for the Armed Forces was activated to prepare for mobilization. Such preparations were large, expensive, and very indiscrete. It is unsurprising that medical officials at the time took notice and became very interested in working to aid this effort, while also recognizing the potential for medical advancement. One year after the Public Health Association conference, Dr. R.A. Vonderlehr commented on this very perspective,

…two important events have occurred which relate to the control of the venereal diseases. The first of these was the mobilization under the Selective Service System, which makes possible, through the examination of a large representative portion of the manpower of the country, a much more exact determination of the prevalence of syphilis and which also presents an opportunity to bring a larger
number of men infected with syphilis and gonorrhea under treatment than ever before in the United States.¹

American doctors had undertaken steps to combat venereal disease effectively starting in World War One². Unfortunately during the intervening years the efforts of medical officials had been significantly reduced due to an inability to compel examination and treatment. Vonderlehr’s statement illustrates that interests of doctors were not merely to support the war, but were also a part of a wider effort to eradicate these diseases entirely. This effort, they believed, would be significantly furthered by the consolidation of the male population. To these doctors, the mustering of forces represented a golden opportunity to test the theories and developments in V.D. controls on a scale not possible before.

Two papers from the Association conference shed light on the perspective of the medical field at the onset of the mobilization. The first of these papers is “Control of the Venereal Diseases in Civilian Areas Adjacent to Concentrations of the Armed Forces.”³ In this paper, A.B. Price and F.J. Weber, doctors from Louisiana, attempt to explain why venereal disease thrives in areas close to major military maneuvers and to suggest practical solutions to remedy the situation. The second paper is “Prostitution as a Source of Infection with the Venereal Diseases in the Armed Forces,” where Dr. Charles Reynolds attempts to explain steps previously taken to combat VD, their effectiveness, and modern methodology for achieving success⁴.

Several things are common between the papers. Foremost amongst these is the concept that the men of the Armed Forces are not at fault. As Reynolds notes, “Venereal diseases cannot and do not originate in the Army. Of necessity they come from the civilian population.”\(^5\) Both papers are also in agreement that civilian as well as military efforts are needed to control the spread of VD. Each piece also discusses the “universal failure” of attempts to legalize and license prostitutes as a method for controlling the diseases.\(^6\) In this perspective, both are in agreement that a critical part of any control system is the ending of prostitution. What represents an advance from other medical advice of the time is their insistence on public education about the problem, built upon the advancements of those who came before. This education necessarily would be, “…not only concerning the dangers of venereal disease and how such disease can be recognized in its early stages... but should also be told of the measures taken for its [the public’s] protection, including the location of treatment centers.”\(^7\) Such information today seems commonplace, but at the time was suppressed for reasons of public “…indifference and prudishness regarding these serious diseases…”\(^8\) However, these two articles are very different in where they focus.

Price and Weber believe that prostitutes are not the sole source of venereal disease. Instead, groups’ locations such as “honkeytonks,” hotels, and tourist areas were a part of the problem.\(^9\) Such locations were often thought of as low or dirty. The stereotyping did not stop here. They suggested that medical officials have the power to keep records of anyone who might be likely to promote the spread of the disease and to regularly examine them, including exams for syphilis. Indeed, those who needed special attention were “female employees in

\(^5\) Ibid., 1276.
\(^7\) Ibid., 916.
\(^8\) Reynolds, “Prostitution as a Source of Infection…,” 1277.
establishments serving food and drink…since many of the sexual contacts of enlisted men are with individuals of this group.”

The focus is on civilian populations, with a particular regard for females in the lower working class. While parts of Price and Weber’s paper may coincide with Reynolds’ work, another key distinction must be made. According to these authors, final authority must rest with health officials. Others who are a part of this plan are just that, a part. The authors themselves state, “The health officer’s course should be pursued with tact, but without losing sight of his objective, and the attainment of that objective will depend in large measure upon how successfully the parties concerned can be persuaded to discharge their full duties.” Such a statement can leave very little doubt as to the intentions of its authors. One important implication is that only health officials can be trusted entirely, but that they are constrained by the necessity of having to work with those outside of their field. In contrast, persuasion does not come into play in Reynolds’ work.

Reynolds’ approach is significantly more pointed. As a retired Major General, his firm belief in military hierarchy shows through his work. While he agrees that there must be cooperation between civil and military authorities, Reynolds contends that use of the military structure has been the most effective means for combating venereal disease. Indeed, his overall suggestion for control states that “prevention is largely an administrative proposition consisting in measures now formulated and standardized through experience in the Army and Navy.” Such a perspective indicates a strong reliance upon the methods and powers of military structure. Even his discussion of prostitution is framed in a militaristic tone.

Prostitution must be recognized as a Fifth Column in our midst to be dealt with accordingly.

10 Ibid., 915.
11 Ibid., 916.
12 Reynolds, “Prostitution as a Source of Infection…,” 1282.
Without restraint the forces of prostitution can decimate a military command. These forces strike the moment mobilization and concentration of military personnel begin, and hang upon the flanks of the forces as they move from one theatre of operations to another.\textsuperscript{13}

In this section as well as others, Reynolds’ perception of prostitutes was “to assemble around military concentrations and to follow the troops,” rather than as a service industry developing in response to troops. Often, Reynolds’ report appears to be apologetic towards the troops who engage with prostitutes. Troops were “dislocated from home influences and transplanted in a foreign environment…” becoming “the prey of prostitutes.”\textsuperscript{14} With this viewpoint, it is again apparent that women become the hostile pariahs disseminating disease rather than the soldiers who frequented many a public woman. Even evidence of higher rates of venereal disease amongst soldiers results merely from the Army being better suited to find and record them.\textsuperscript{15}

Both of these articles provide insights into the worldview of American medicine with regard to venereal disease and the world greater in 1940. The mobilization of the armed forces and even the draft were imminent was well known.\textsuperscript{16} As a result, American medicine prepared itself for what was seen as an important issue for the coming war. American physicians were concerned with protecting the young men from VD who would go forth to defend America from Nazi Germany. This protection was to be focused on suppressing prostitution, educating soldiers and the public, and finally on the actual treatment of the infected. Incorporation of serious education is proactive, but the rest of the plan is very lopsided in its intended application. The apologetic nature with which soldiers were viewed did not do justice to some of the true victims in this system, the women caught in prostitution. Their voices are silent in these discussions, as are those of community leaders who are considered such a vital part of both plans for stopping

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 1281.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 1280.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 1277.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 1281.
the perceived epidemic. Despite these shortcomings, the optimism of the authors show the confidence of the American spirit, “better than ever before we have the means and the determination to control these diseases in our military forces.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 1276.
Bibliography


