

## Message from Sara H. Cody, M.D., Santa Clara County Health Officer **National Public Health Week, April 6-12, 2015**



Whether it's clean water to drink, safe food to eat, or stopping an epidemic, the work of public health is reflected in our daily lives. You are the public in public health, and we at the Santa Clara County Public Health Department are dedicated to working with you to make our community the healthiest it can be. Public health has improved a great deal in the past 100 years, and I'd like to highlight for you five critical public health achievements to illustrate how far we have come and how much work is still needed.

### **Immunizations**

Thanks to public health vaccination programs, many infectious diseases that were common 100 years ago—like diphtheria and polio—are virtually unknown in our community today. Vaccines have ensured that millions of children no longer suffer needlessly from preventable infectious diseases. Some vaccine-preventable diseases that we thought were a thing of the past, like measles and pertussis (whooping cough) are back in our community, reminding us of the importance of childhood vaccination and the continued need for public health vigilance.

### **Control of Infectious Disease**

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, infectious diseases were the leading cause of death. People routinely died from things like pneumonia, tuberculosis, and diarrheal diseases. Improvements in sanitation, the advent of antibiotics, and public health disease control measures helped decrease the number of people who died from infectious diseases. In 1900 life expectancy in the United States was just 47 years of age, compared to a current life expectancy of around 76 years of age. These days, chronic diseases, like heart disease, are the leading causes of death.

### **Tobacco as a Health Hazard**

Remember smoke-filled airplanes and smoking sections in restaurants? An important accomplishment of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the reduction of smoking among adults. In 2011, approximately 13% of adult Californians reported smoking, a decline of more than 40% since the 1988 passage of CA Prop 99, a 25-cent tax on cigarettes.

### **Safer and Healthier Foods**

During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, contaminated food, milk, and water caused many infections like typhoid fever, botulism, and scarlet fever. When the sources of foodborne diseases were identified, public health workers educated people about hand washing, sanitation, refrigeration, and pasteurization. Educating the public about safe food-handling practices continues to be central to our work here in public health.

### **Healthier Mothers and Babies**

In 1900, up to 30% of infants in some U.S. cities died before reaching their first birthday. Efforts to reduce infant deaths focused on improving environmental and living conditions in urban areas. Public health's interventions have contributed greatly to reducing infant mortality. Despite the dramatic decline in infant and maternal mortality during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, challenges remain. Perhaps the greatest is the persistent difference in maternal

and infant health among various racial/ethnic groups, particularly between black and white women and infants. Although overall rates have plummeted, national data show that black infants are more than twice as likely to die as white infants. Programs like our [Black Infant Health program](#) seek to address this distressing public health inequity by providing comprehensive case management and other services to African-American women who are pregnant or parenting a child who is under the age of one.

Public health has had and will continue to have an impact on our lives every day. April 6 – 12 is [National Public Health Week](#), a week when we celebrate all that public health has accomplished and take time to reflect on the important work still needed in order to prevent disease, promote healthy choices, and protect the health of the people of Santa Clara County. Please join me in thanking our tireless public health professionals and in celebrating National Public Health Week.

For more information about the great public health achievements of the last century, please visit <http://www.cdc.gov/about/history/tengpha.htm>.