



FROM NATIONAL NEGRO HEALTH WEEK TO NATIONAL PUBLIC HEALTH WEEK

By: Pheobe Pollitt

Abstract: National Negro Health Week is a program that targeted the African-American population, and this precursor of National Public Health Week left a legacy of health awareness in the US. The active political participation of local and national National Negro Health Week groups led to paved streets, safer foods and drugs, clean water and more training and employment of African-American health workers.

Pollitt, Pheobe.(1996). "From National Negro Health Week to National Public Health Week". *Journal of Community Health*, December, 1996. Version of record available at doi: 10.1007/BF01702601.

FROM NATIONAL NEGRO HEALTH WEEK TO NATIONAL PUBLIC HEALTH WEEK

In the early years of the twentieth century, African-Americans were leaving rural, agricultural settings to become urban dwellers. As industry and business increased in cities, so did minority populations. Their American Dream had begun this new environment seemed to hold unlimited possibilities. At the same time, the relationship between health and social conditions became increasingly apparent to scientists and social reformers. Public health practitioners undertook a variety of activities to decrease preventable death and disease. As state boards of health and volunteer agencies increased both financially and in professional stature, they worked to make citizens aware of how social and living conditions affected health. Programs to establish sanitary water and sewage disposal, hookworm eradication campaigns, and programs to screen and treat a variety of illnesses exemplify some of the work accomplished by these agencies. While these activities benefited hundreds of individuals in many communities, they were disproportionately led by and directed towards white people.¹ Before the civil rights movement began in earnest, the National Urban League documented much of the racial reform between 1910 and 1940. Furthermore, the National Urban League and the National Negro Business League provided funding for many causes which have developed over the years, crossed racial boundaries, and benefited children and adults from all walks of life. However, one program, National Negro Health Week, targeted the African-American population. This precursor of National Public Health week left a legacy of health awareness in the United States. Unfortunately, the true history of National Public Health Week has been largely ignored.

Statistics gathered by United States government agencies at the beginning of this century reflect a great disparity between the health of white and African-American citizens. Tuberculosis killed African-Americans at three times the rate of whites in the early 1900s.² Likewise, deaths from malaria, syphilis, and hookworm were also higher for the African-American population.³ In 1910 the average life expectancy for white females was 53.6 years and 50.2 years for white males. African-American females had a life expectancy of only 37.6 years and African-American males had an average

life span of only 34 years.⁴ In cities such as New York, Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans, the infant mortality rate for blacks was more than double that of whites.⁵ Given the health inequalities between races coupled with the relative lack of attention to African-American health concerns by the mostly white public health bureaucracies, African-American leaders initiated health promotion and disease prevention programs in their own communities. National Negro Health Week was a result of these efforts.

In 1900, Dr. Booker T. Washington of Tuskegee Institute founded the National Negro Business League, an organization of successful businessmen who encouraged other African Americans to pursue education and business ventures. Washington felt that through organizations such as this, the African-American community would come to understand the non-materialistic benefits of business and education. One of these "benefits," he hoped, was winning respect from whites as well as other African Americans. Although many African-American leaders, such as W.E.B. DuBois, disagreed with this rationale, Washington's determination remained strong. As a result of his tenacity, and with the influence of the National Negro Business League, National Negro Health Week became a reality.

In 1913, the Negro Organization Society of Virginia, a general focus self-help group, proclaimed "Clean-up Day." On the appointed day approximately 130,000 African-Americans in Virginia whitewashed buildings, discarded refuse, and generally cleaned up their homes, neighborhoods, and community buildings and grounds.⁶ The results were so great that in 1914 the group expanded the program to "Clean-up Week." Washington became aware of Virginia's "clean-up" activities and with the cooperation of the National Negro Business League, nationalized the idea.⁷ In 1914 he noted that:

. . . 45 percent of all deaths among Negroes are preventable; that there are 450,000 Negroes seriously ill all the time; that the annual cost of this illness is \$75,000,000; [and] that sickness and death cost Negroes annually \$100,000,000.⁸

. Working with a constellation of African-American medical, nursing, educational, religious, business, fraternal, and civic organizations, and just months before his death, Washington declared April 11-17, 1915 as "Health Improvement Week." Dr. W. A. Aery of Hampton Institute, a strong force behind Health Improvement Week, along with Dr. Robert Morton, noted in 1915: "Sunshine, hot water, soap, brooms, whitewash, trash barrels- these are important weapons in fighting the Negro death rate. . . .⁹ The National Urban League and the Anson Phelps Stokes Fund

provided early funding and leadership for this effort. Again the response was overwhelming the enthusiasm, publicity, and participation from communities and individuals made Health Improvement Week an astounding success.

In addition to activities focusing on school health, home health, and sanitation during Health Improvement Week, there were related church sermons, nightly meetings with speakers and movies, weekend rallies, and efforts to persuade local health officials to give more attention to the needs of African-Americans. Once the week was nationalized, it was renamed National Negro Health Week and became an annual event.

After Washington's death in 1915, Dr. Morton succeeded him as the principal of Tuskegee Institute. He also assumed the leadership of the National Negro Health Week movement. To pay tribute to his work, and since April 5 was Dr. Washington's birthday, the first week of April was designated National Negro Health Week.¹⁰

The National Negro Health Week Committee defined the purpose of the Week this way:

... to stimulate the people as a whole to cooperative endeavor in clean-up, educational, and specific hygienic and clinical services for general sanitary improvement of the community and for health betterment of the individual, family and home. •

Each day of the Week had a different emphasis. According to program ideas disseminated by the national office to local National Negro Health Week committees throughout the 1930's, a composite picture of typical activities emerges:

Sunday: Mobilization Day. Clergy were encouraged to preach sermons related to the annual health week topic. Sample sermons were made available from the national coordinating committee. Pamphlets on a variety of health topics and a listing of the week's events were distributed through churches and by community leaders on Sunday.

Monday: Home Health Day. Activities centered on individual health concerns. Private homes were cleaned up. Personal hygiene, nutritious diets, sanitary surroundings, adequate ventilation, and care and control of sickness in the home were emphasized on Home Health Day.

Tuesday: Community Sanitation Day. Cooperation between the local National Negro Health Week committee and government agencies to ensure clean water, safe milk supplies, paved streets and similar health related community improvements was emphasized. Local boards of health were encouraged to contribute to National Negro Health Week programs on Tuesdays.

Wednesday: Special Campaign Day. Each year the Week focused on a specific aspect of health. For example, the 1929 theme was "A Complete Health Examination for Everybody." In 1981 it was "The Establishment of the National Negro Health Week on a Year Round Basis," and in 1936 the special campaign topic was "The Child and the School as Factors in Community Health." Surveys were often conducted on Wednesday to ascertain and prioritize the health concerns in African-American neighborhoods. Also on Wednesday, poster contests, special lectures, radio broadcasts and awards ceremonies were held to highlight the campaign theme.

Thursday: Adult Health Day. Groups such as the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses and the National Medical Association provided opportunities for multiphasic screening, physical examinations, and adult health education.

Friday: School Health Day. Clinical activities such as administering immunizations and screenings for dental, vision, and hearing were held. Playgrounds and sanitary privies were constructed on school grounds during School Health Day. In addition, students participated in health related games, songs, lessons, and essay and poetry writing.

Saturday: General Clean Up Day. Community owned buildings and grounds were cleaned up and repaired, refuse and hazards were removed and cooperative improvements such as screening windows and rodent and insect extermination programs were undertaken to increase sanitation, ventilation, and safety. Parades and pageants rewarding the healthiest (instead of the prettiest) girls, community recreational activities, and awards ceremonies often occurred on Saturday afternoon or evening to end the week on a high note. •

The second Sunday of National Negro Health Week was "Report and Follow Up Sunday." Local leaders assessed the past week's activities and began planning for the following year. Certificates of Cooperation and Merit were distributed to the Week's contributors. Articles describing the week's highlights were released to local newspapers and radio stations. Finally, the necessary forms were completed and sent to the National Negro Health Week national offices.¹¹

The activities of the Week were made possible and administered through interdisciplinary community-based organizations. Doctors, dentists, nurses, other health care professionals, editors, clergy, social workers, educators, and lay community leaders were frequent in members of the local National Negro Health Week committees.¹² National officials suggested that each local group appoint eight standing committees: Executive, Supplies and Materials, Finance, Cooperation, Special-Day, Speakers, Newspaper Publicity, and Clinics.¹³ In many places these committees functioned year round to make the Week a success.

The number of activities and participants outgrew the capacity of a

voluntary committee to coordinate. Statistics for 1922 show 129,350 people in 15 states participated in National Negro Health Week activities.⁵ By 1939 there were approximately two million participants in 35 states.¹⁴ In 1939 during the Week, 3,444 outhouses were constructed or improved; 51,208 incidents of home insect and rodent control activities occurred; 102,113 homes and lots were cleaned up; 1,543,210 people attended health lectures; 457 radio stations carried a National Negro Health Week address; 2,621 articles about the Week appeared in newspapers; and 182,500 people saw movies or exhibits related to health.¹⁴ The National Urban League, Tuskegee Institute, Hampton Institute, Howard University, and others donated money and supplies to keep National Negro Health Week afloat during the first six crucial years.⁶ In 1921 both the Julius Rosenwald Fund, a philanthropy dedicated to improving the plight of rural southerners, both black and white, and the U.S. Public Health Service began supporting the National Negro Health Week movement.⁷

In 1932, the U.S. Public Health Service provided permanent office space for the National Negro Health Week movement. In July 1934, the work of the Week was expanded when the U.S. Public Health Service created a Negro Division within its organization.¹⁵ Dr. Roscoe Brown, an African-American dentist, was hired to direct the division and was given the title "Health Education Specialist of the Negro Division." Office personnel included clerical and stenographic assistants. This new division's primary responsibilities included directing the annual observance of National Negro Health Week, preparing health education materials for the Week and a new quarterly bulletin (*National Negro Health News*), as well as promoting year round conferences, lectures, and activities aimed towards improving the health of African-Americans.

As an official government agency with federal support, the influence of National Negro Health Week grew. Leaders of the organization realized that health is both a personal and social responsibility. Therefore, in the 1930s and 40s National Negro Health Week officials and volunteers worked in conjunction with mainstream health agencies such as the Tuberculosis Association, the American Red Cross, as well as local, state, and federal departments of health in the areas of health screening, treatment, and education.¹⁶ While teaching and encouraging individuals to improve their own and their family's health, the National Negro Health Week movement also worked with collective groups such as The Washington Housing Association, the Henry Street (New York) Nursing Service and the Association for Improving the Conditions of the Poor. These agencies combined forces to improve health through enforcement of housing codes, increased workplace health and safety, passage of safe food and

drug legislation, and legislation to provide a national health insurance plan for all Americans.¹⁷

In 1950, reflecting an increasing spirit of racial cooperation in the country, the work of the Negro Division of the U.S. Public Health Service was blended with the programs intended for white citizens and National Negro Health Week became "National Public Health Week."¹⁸ A white male health official from North Carolina illustrated the "progressive" thought of the time when he explained,

We have no desire or intention to single out the problem of the Negro for a special discussion, because one of our cardinal principles in this office for nearly a quarter of a century has been that we regard the Negro and his problems identical with the white man and his problems. . . . Negroes. . . need of the same kind of treatment when they are sick that the white man needs. . . ••

It is impossible to quantify the effect that National Negro Health Week had on individuals and communities. However, during its 35 years of existence, millions of citizens participated in health enhancing activities. Thousands of people were seen by physicians, nurses and dentists, tens of thousands of sanitary privies were constructed, and hundreds of thousands of homes were made more habitable. The active political participation of local and national National Negro Health Week groups resulted in paved streets, clean water, safer foods and drugs, and more training and employment of African-American health professionals by local, state, and federal health agencies. The National Negro Health Week movement also gave people an opportunity for honing skills in community organizing, public speaking, writing, and political activity. Dr. Booker T. Washington's promise of non-material benefits *had* become a national reality. It continues today, almost a century later, as National Public Health Week.

REFERENCES

1. Link WA *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism 1880-1930*. Chapel Hill: University of N.C. Press, 1992, 79.
2. King VF and KF Kiple. *Another Dimension to the Black Diaspora*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 52.
3. Lerner M and O Anderson. *Health Progress in the United States 1890-1960*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963, 33-34.
4. Dublin LI. The Health of the Negro: Striking Progress in One Decade. In *Reader's Digest*. September 1950, 50-52.
5. Jones EK. The Negroes' Struggle for Health. In *Opportunity*. 1923, 6-7.
6. Brown RC. The National Negro Health Week Movement. In *Journal of Negro Education*. 1937, 553-564.
7. Beardsley EH. *A History of Neglect Health Care for Blacks and MiU Worlcen in the Twentieth Century South*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987, 102-103.
8. Peterson FD. Statement Concerning National Negro Health Week. In *National Negro Health News*. (7) 2, 1939, 13.
9. Aery WA. Better Health and Better Homes for Negroes. In *The Suroey*. 15 May 1915, 158-159.

10. The Negro Health Crusade Goes On. In *Hygeia*. April 1934, 330.
11. Program-National Negro Health Week. In *National Negro Health News*. (2) 1, 1934, 1-2.
12. National Negro Health Week. In *Cummt Events in Negro Education*. 1935, 308-309.
13. Plan for Community Organization. In *National Negro Health News*. (3) 4, 1935, 3.
14. Statistical Report. In *National Negro Health News*. (7) 3, 2-3.
15. Comely PB. Health Assets and Liabilities of the Negro. In *oppmtunity*. 23 (4) 198-200.
16. Program-National Negro Health Week. In *National Negro Health News*. (3) 1, 1935, 1-2.
17. Program-National Negro Health Week. In *National Negro Health News*. (4) 1, 1936, 1-2.
18. National Negro Health News Ceases Publication. In *Juurnal of the National Medical Association*. January 1951, 59.
19. North Carolina Reviews Experiences in Negro Health Work. In *National Negro Health News*. (7) 1, 1939, 20-21.