

THE BIRTH OF THE FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

The birth of the Florida Department of Health in 1889 and the subsequent Hillsborough County Health Department in 1936 had its beginnings right here in Hillsborough County, with a crusade led by John Perry Wall, MD. A former mayor of Tampa and the first American to come to the conclusion that mosquitoes were carriers of Yellow Fever, Wall lobbied the Florida Legislature from 1875 to 1885 to pass a law establishing a board of health because “the duty of preserving the health and lives of it’s citizens from causes of disease is as incumbent on the State as is that of suppressing rapine and murder.” The motion was rejected on the grounds that the \$200 dollars for the purpose was considered an exorbitant request!

The Yellow Fever outbreak in 1888 was time of panic in the streets. The epidemic began during the summer in the southern part of Florida and rapidly spread northward. Residents of Jacksonville compared it to the plague pestilence of the middle ages as stores were boarded up; hotels and schools closed; and the cities became ghost towns. Concern for personal safety outweighed virtually everything else. Neglect of the sick and helpless was commonplace, including one’s own family members with people often resorting to violence to keep possibly infected people away.

Unlike other outbreaks of the disease during the previous half-century or so, 1888 was also a campaign year and candidates for office had been at the mercy of quarantine regulations that prevented them from traveling county to county to campaign. The newly elected Governor of Florida, Francis P. Fleming, lost his brother a few days before the November election. With political and public sentiment at a peak, Dr. Joseph P. Wall of Tampa, Florida once again took up the cause and relentlessly pressed the governor-elect for action.

Immediately after his inauguration, Francis P. Fleming called a special session of the legislature and described the shocking conditions he has seen during the outbreak. There was considerable opposition to the idea of a State Board of Health. “The state government has no

business getting involved – leave it to the local level” was the most common refrain. But, fifteen days later a bill was passed and signed establishing and financing the Florida State Board of Health in 1889. Dr. John P. Wall’s one-man crusade of fifteen years was now successful. He was recognized, both immediately and to the present time, as the “father of the State Board of Health.” A memorial plaque presented to Dr. Wall’s family by the Florida State Medical Association can still be seen hanging on the wall at Tampa General Hospital.

THE BIRTH OF THE HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

From 1889 to 1930, there were no county health departments, only the State Board of Health with the state divided into five districts (12-15 counties 300,000 population), each district having a district health officer, a sanitation officer, public health nurse and a clerk all housed at a central point in the district. After the terrifying Spanish Flu epidemic in Tampa that afflicted 19,170 people (killing 278) in a one-month period during the fall of 1918, the city recognized the need for its own Health Code customized for the area. In 1920 the city established the Tampa Health Department to administer the code and start a new focus onto school-health.

In 1929, the stock market crash caused the great depression and unprecedented unemployment including nurses and even doctors. A vast number of people needed medical help but no longer had the financial means. Since the State Board of Health had expanded its purview over the past decade from simply mosquito bourn viruses into Maternal-Child Health, Vital Statistics, TB and other communicable diseases, its leaders recognized the need for de-centralization. Researching the organization and

functioning of the approximately 500 County Health Departments (CHD) in other states, the legislature authorized the creation of CHDs with the idea of broad cooperation, joint funding and mutual responsibility between state and county being the strong point. In 1930, Taylor County became the first CHD.



Hillsborough County formed the 11th CHD in 1936 when the Board of County Commissioners contributed \$15,000 which State government matched to get started. Clinics were held at the Lee Building in Plant City and various schools, community centers and public buildings throughout the county.

Headquarters were based out of 1301 Florida Avenue, sharing space with the Regional State Board of Health Laboratory. Dr. Joseph Spoto was appointed Medical Director (Health Officer) and Mrs. Elizabeth Perkins as Director of Nursing Service. The total staff included 2 sanitary officers, 3 nurses, 1 VD clinician, 1 dentist, 1 secretary, and 1 clerk. In 1939, the Hillsborough County Health Department (HCHD) moved into the same building as the Tampa Health Department at 1420 Tampa Street on the corner of Scott Street and the following year they merged into one organization.

Permanent sites for HCHD clinics were needed as county population grew. The Joyce Ely Clinic in Ruskin was the first of these in 1954, named after Victoria Joyce Ely, RN, the first licensed nurse midwife in Florida. The main office moved to a new, larger building in 1967 at 1105 East Kennedy Boulevard and the old Plant City Clinic was moved to a new building at 302 N. Michigan Avenue in 1969. The Kelton Clinic opened at 4704 Montgomery Avenue in Port Tampa in 1975, named for Floyd. M. "Doc" Kelton, a beloved Port Tampa Pharmacist, followed within months by the Sulphur Springs Clinic at 8605 N. Mitchell Avenue. The North Hillsborough Clinic opened on 9826 N. Sheldon Road and the old Joyce Ely Clinic replaced by a new one in 1978. A dedicated TB Clinic opened in 1997 and the Kelton Clinic was replaced by a new building in 2002. The University Clinic at located 13601 N. 22nd Street opened in 2006.

There have been 8 directors of the Hillsborough County Health Department since Dr. Joseph Soto in 1936. Frank Chappell, MD, MPH, took over in 1945 until his death in 1961. John Neil, MD, held the post from then until 1979. Donald S. Kwalick, MD, MPH, was the Director until 1990 when Joyner Sims, PhD stepped in until 1993. Luis



Miranda, MD ran the HCHD for a short time before Wayne Clark was appointed acting director till 1996 when Douglas A. Holt, M.D., F.A.C.P. became the director and remains so to this day.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE IMPACT OF THE HCHD

Over the decades, the Hillsborough County Health Department (HCHD) has made a major impact on the health and well-being of our community. During World War II, their fight against VD made national headlines before the introduction of Penicillin in 1944 simplified matters greatly. The HCHD enacted the first Milk Code in the state in 1949 and was an instrumental partner in establishing a proper sewage system in the county beginning in 1951. Inspections of migrant labor camps began in 1959 to insure that healthy housing standards were maintained. Hillsborough was a leader in field-testing of the trivalent oral polio vaccine from 1961-1962 (which was then adopted nation-wide), virtually wiping out the disease in the county by 1963. The HCHD also lead the fight against the "new" problem of air pollution from 1963-1970. The inclusion of the Federally-funded WIC (Women & Infant Children) program in nearly all of its clinics occurred in 1977. The STD Prevention / Training Center (a joint project of the Florida Department of Health, the University of South Florida College of Medicine's Division of Infectious Disease and Tropical Medicine, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) opened downtown in 1988 providing STD medical education to health care providers in Florida. In 1992 the SHARPS program was introduced. "The Bay Area Used Sharps Disposal Program" is a community service to assist the residents of Hills County with a safe and environmentally sound method for disposal of sharps (syringe, needles and lancets). A Lead Poisoning Education Program began in 1994 and Syndromic Tracking and Reporting System (STARS) was introduced in 2001 which searches for patterns in hospitals which could signal a public health concern. These are only a few examples of the Hillsborough County Health Department's impact over the years.

The HCHD has stood up to many public health crises in its history as well. 1946 brought a polio outbreak that quarantined the State of Florida

from the rest of the country! In 1947 Rabies was almost out of control in the county before efforts in forming dog control were enacted. The Swine Flu vaccinations of 1976, the Hillsborough River raw sewage pollution of 1979 which made headlines as well as the 1981 discovery of AIDS continues to have a major impact on our community. In 1989 and 1991, Hillsborough County had frightening measles outbreaks. Rabies outbreaks, a problem several times during the 1990s, and the post-9/11 and Hurricane Katrina worlds have brought whole new areas of potential health threats, of which the HCHD remains a leader in preparing for.

Despite state level changes such as "The State Board of Health" becoming "The Division of Health in Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services" in 1969, the Health Department (aka Division of Health) being placed under District VI of the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (DHRS) in 1975, to separation from HRS to in order to form the individual "Florida Department of Health" in 1997... the Hillsborough County Health Department has continued to adapt and grow in order to meet the ever changing needs of its customers and community during its long history. Our Mission remains to Promote and Protect the Public's Health and our Vision is clear: "Building the Future: Healthy People and a Healthy Community".

Then...



Now...

