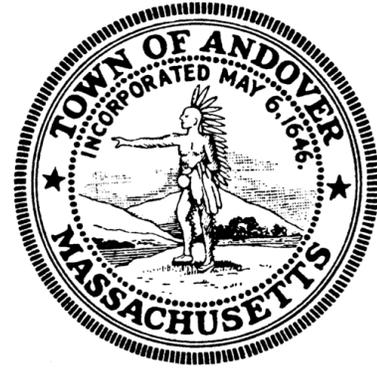


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Andover Public Health Op-Ed: Progress in Public Health

The following is an op-ed from Andover Director of Public Health Thomas Carbone:

What was life like 100 years ago when our parents and grandparents were young? What were the public health risks at the time? Well, for starters it was common to see large, red signs warning that members of a household were quarantined because of exposure to mumps, measles, scarlet fever and other deadly diseases. Children routinely died of these illnesses, creating the need for quarantine orders. Public health nurses went door-to-door providing treatment and education, and physicians visited you at home.

Conditions in society were generally unsanitary and even unsafe. State hospitals were set up throughout Massachusetts to isolate the sick and to house people who were shunned by society. Sanitariums were the norm, where people with polio lived their lives in iron lungs, tuberculosis patients were sent for treatment, and the mentally ill were locked up. People with learning disabilities and orphans were warehoused inside buildings with unsafe living conditions. Homes contained lead paint and asbestos, and some might have still used outhouses for toilets.

The industrial revolution was in full swing, with factories forcing employees to work long hours for very little pay. Factory doors were chained shut to keep workers at their stations and machinery operators were being maimed and even killed by machines. There was no regard for the safety of the operator, and many lost fingers when they did not move out of the way quickly enough.

In the early 1900's, the Merrimack and Shawsheen Rivers were open sewers, unfit for drinking water or for swimming. Factories along the rivers dumped their waste directly into the water and household waste lines led directly to the river banks. If there were fabric dyeing facilities along the river, you could see which colors the factories were using based on the color of the water.

Residents who had gardens at home could grow fresh vegetables in the summer and fall. They canned or preserved unused produce so they could eat it in the colder months. People bought meat and fruit at neighborhood markets, which did not always have refrigeration and nothing more than soap and water was used to clean a cutting board. To get ice, residents received deliveries from the "ice man" who knew the size of the ice block to deliver based on where people placed their ice cards in the window of their home.

Society has come a long way in the past 100 years. Now, vaccines are the norm. We are able to prevent numerous illnesses and even death, in both children and adults, that in the past would have been devastating. Polio is on the verge of being eliminated worldwide, just as Smallpox has been. Working conditions favor the safety of employees, and housing and building codes dictate the minimum conditions that are required to keep residents safe. Rivers are being cleaned, are being used as sources of drinking water and recreation destinations.

Food safety has been vastly improved, with refrigeration in every home and market to protect the quality of foods. As a result, we can transport foods from warmer climates and have fresh fruits and vegetables year round.

The folly of warehousing patients has been exposed, and living and treatment conditions have improved. Harmful substances like lead paint, asbestos and pesticides like Diazinon are no longer used.

While all of these improvements have enhanced the quality and length of our lives, there are some health challenges that have resulted from our improved living conditions. Technology has lured us into becoming couch potatoes, where children (and many adults) choose to sit in front of gaming systems and televisions instead of being physically active. Food is readily available for most of us, and the easiest obtainable foods are generally those with the least nutritional value. Obesity, from lack of exercise, poor nutrition and sedentary lifestyles has become a serious problem in the United States. It causes health problems like heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and certain types of cancer.

Technology has also introduced a way for people to obtain information on a variety of health and wellness topics. While there are many legitimate science-based sites, there are also many sites that contain misleading, inaccurate and even false information. It is the responsibility of public health professionals to accurately disseminate factual and up-to-date health information.

Public health is a constantly evolving field, and it encompasses many aspects of our lives. As National Public Health Week comes to a close, we hope that you will continue to support your local health departments, and will rest assured that we are doing everything we can to make your lives better.

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A message from the Andover Department of Public Health distributed by:

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