Development of a Voluntary Agency for Venereal Disease Control*

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In 1841, a Frenchman who had visited America wrote the following:

Americans of all ages, all conditions and all dispositions constantly form associations . . . religious, moral, serious, futile, extensive or restricted, enormous or diminutive . . . If it be proposed to advance some truth, or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society. Wherever, at the head of some new undertaking, you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association . . . I have often admired the extreme skill with which the inhabitants of the United States succeeded in proposing a common object to the exertions of a great many men, and in getting them voluntarily to pursue it.1,2

The "common object" for the Los Angeles Venereal Disease Council was arrived at during a teaching program in which nurses in service, students from the University of California, and three schools of nursing were oriented in public health as practised by the Los Angeles City Health Department in a program consisting of two days of formal lectures on venereal diseases and one month of practical experience in the department. Organized to meet the requirements of the State Board of Nurse Examiners, the first course was held toward the end of August, 1943.

This teaching program, as well as the Venereal Disease Council, was conceived and developed by a state public health nurse assigned to the Los Angeles City Health Department. She had had experience with a lay organization for the advancement of public health in Alameda County. She had seen the usefulness of that organization in promoting public health, supplying the official health agency with needed personnel and equipment items, and in bringing to the attention of civic governing bodies the importance of an adequate budget for health. Certain guiding principles in organization were obtained from publications of the American Social Hygiene Association.3,4

The third lecture series for nurses was expanded to include a few guests from health and welfare agencies. Other social agencies became attentive and the fourth series of lectures was attended by approximately 100 persons, some attracted by newspaper publicity given to the meeting. At this institute of November 19, 1943, on the medical, public health, social, and psychiatric aspects of venereal disease control, a panel discussion aroused such interest and so many unanswered problems that members of the panel met formally at a later date to discuss plans for organized venereal disease education in city schools.

As a result of general interest, ideas unfolded. Some thirty-two additional persons, representing City and State Departments of Health, schools and colleges, newspapers, police officers, radio studios, medical specialists, labor, Parent-Teacher Association, League

of Women Voters, Council of Social Agencies, American Institute of Family Relations, and Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish church representatives accepted invitations to join the original panel group of seven. The City Health Officer called the first committee meeting December 7, 1943. Some twenty-five attended. A temporary chairman and a secretary were elected. The chairman appointed finance, planning, and nomination committees. A short talk on present venereal disease control activities was delivered. Committee members suggested that more work should be done in public education, school education, and in the rehabilitation of sex delinquents. A resolution was adopted requesting that the Surgeon General make permanent recordings of the K.F.I. radio broadcasts on venereal diseases, which at that time were receiving national attention.

The planning committee met again in December to prepare for a general meeting on January 20, 1944. Fourteen more members were added, including representatives from the Merchants and Manufacturers Association, Hollywood, political organizations, courts, various governmental institutions, and other health department members. At the January meeting it was reported that, due to the influence of the Council, the Parent-Teacher Association had employed a nationally known authority on sex education for the purpose of instructing teachers in facts and methods of presenting sex education in primary and secondary schools. This program was approved by the Board of Education. Teacher credits were allowed. At the same meeting, a well known family relations expert delivered a talk on divorce in relation to venereal disease, and a professor of psychology of a local college presented plans for a psychologic work-up for venereal disease inpatients. It was thought that individual findings of the latter study could be useful in making referrals to the rehabilitation program of the California Youth Authority. During this second meeting, the desirability of having an executive secretary who would carry out the instructions of the committee, was mentioned.

The group formally went into action February 10, 1944. Regular officers were elected, an executive committee was selected, the name “Coördinating Committee for Venereal Disease Control” was chosen, subcommittees on finance, publicity, education, institutes, and psychologic studies were appointed, and a statement of purpose was formally adopted.

The statement of purpose reads as follows:

It is the purpose of the Coördinating Committee to serve as a clearing house, information center, and medium of exchange for various community organizations which have to do with problems relating to venereal disease control in its broader aspects; to stimulate interest in problems that need attention, and to extend and facilitate the services of the health department in the control of venereal disease. The Coördinating Committee is not an operating organization but functions in an advisory, promotional and coördinating capacity. Through its services the work of other community agencies in the solution of venereal disease and related problems is to be promoted as well as that of the health department.

This purpose of the organization is in effect that of any non-professional and nonofficial voluntary health agency. It is promotional in character, utilizing the methods of education, publicity, and propaganda to achieve the two essential needs: (1) justification—by carrying the gospel, and (2) perpetuation—by attracting new members and new support. It also enlarges the field of activity to include the basic factors of promiscuity and “average of concern for body health” in the spread of venereal disease as related to education, opportunity, housing, medical care, and other normal human growth requirements. In line with current thought,
the committee was not to carry out operational functions. However, some operational tasks are necessary even to a voluntary health agency. Some tangible demonstration of usefulness and some promotional springboard, such as chest x-rays or blood tests, must be carried out.

Following the formal organization of the committee, rules of membership, policy statements, and a constitution were formulated by the executive committee and adopted by the membership. At each subsequent regular monthly meeting, leaders in governmental and voluntary agencies presented formal talks on their activities in relation to venereal disease control. Speakers included members of the police department, judiciary, Department of Institutions, Mayor's office, and Social Protective Division of the Federal Security Agency. Since the Venereal Disease Council was nonofficial and responsible only to itself and the public, it could, and did, scrutinize the activity of every agency. Mystics and logicians alike were granted impartial hearings.

In 1945, the committee was well under way. Early in the year a resolution memorializing the Mayor and City Council to study ways and means for increasing the health budget, was drawn. This resolution was in turn backed by the Association of School Physicians, Council of School Nurses, the Junior League of Los Angeles, Los Angeles Central Labor Council, Southern California Association of Life Science Teachers, Tenth District Parent-Teacher Association, California Protective Society, Health Division of Welfare Council, League of Women Voters, Los Angeles County Probation Committee, and a Teachers' Union. In later meetings with the Mayor, supported by Army, Navy, and Public Health Service officials, an emergency increase of approximately $78,000 per year was obtained for the health department. This, in my opinion, has been the greatest contribution of the committee.

At about the same time, connection with the Columbia Foundation was established, and arrangements were made for the committee to receive a grant of $10,000. This fund was made available for one year, during which time the committee was to demonstrate its worth to the community. Support during succeeding years was, in the Foundation's judgment, to come from other sources. The committee incorporated under the title of the "Venereal Disease Council of the City and County of Los Angeles," a name adopted earlier to eliminate the objectionable and indefinite terms of "Coordinating" and "Control" and to widen the area to be served.

An excellent selection was made in employing an executive secretary who was well qualified, scholastically and by experience, and was very personable. This selection was possible during a time of acute labor shortage because of a relatively high salary. He began work in July, 1945, 1½ years after formal organization of the committee. There can be no doubt about the wisdom of this move, yet in retrospect it seems that the Council members' participation decreased slightly while the executive secretary's responsibilities increased.

A diagrammatic picture of the organization from its inception to January, 1947, is presented by the following list of projects and accomplishments. The Council:

1. Revealed as a result of a telephone survey that social agencies lacked information but had an enthusiastic desire to participate in the program.
2. Instituted psychologic work-ups consisting of psychometric tests, personality inventories and aptitudes, on venereal disease patients.
3. Secured Parent-Teacher Association funds and sponsorship for a series of lectures
over an 18 month period on sex education. Approximately 850 persons completed the course.

4. Surveyed prison facilities for prostitutes and encouraged improvements in jail recreational and rehabilitation programs.

5. Compiled a bibliography on the venereal diseases for public libraries.

6. Actively supported the health department in a substantial improvement in the budget for personnel.

7. Supported increase in salary for public health nurses.

8. Developed with the Board of Education a sex education lecture series for mothers attending child health clinics.

9. Submitted a resolution to the Board of Education requesting an exploration of needs and methods of sex education in public schools. This was formally acknowledged by the Board which authorized the formation of a study committee of experts and interested persons.

10. Actively assisted in the educational program at the local Rapid Treatment Center, arranging for circulating library service at this institution.

11. Obtained permission of Catholic authorities to resume showings in schools of the film "Know for Sure," which had been withdrawn due to their objections.

12. Supplied and distributed many pamphlets on sex education. Prepared the pamphlet Do You Know and posters on the Rapid Treatment Center for clinic patients.

13. Maintained an active program of film showings and lectures on venereal disease for public groups.

14. MATERIALLY aided in arranging educational and blood survey programs in six high schools.

15. Planned four large public institutes on all phases of venereal disease control.

16. Interests a local high school to plan and carry out a forum on health and family life for Public School Week. Sixteen schools participated.

17. Prepared material and participated in a weekly radio program on health and family life.

18. Completed a survey of adults regarding their source of sex information and their retrospective views on their schools' program.

19. Explored the need for an adequate teaching film on venereal disease for public schools.

20. Initiated five "work shops" for teachers on Family Life Education. Approximately 150 teachers completed these sessions.

21. Originated a program, with the cooperation of the Southern California Retail Drugists Association, for informing druggists regarding the procedure and importance of the proper referral of venereal disease patients.

22. Suggested the program of monthly mailings to private physicians on venereal disease trends, diagnosis, and treatment.

The sharing of problems and the pooling of experience in their solution, as exemplified in the Council, leads to group participation and group action. The process is slow but effective, and in looking backward, the number of accomplishments is surprising.

During the first part of 1946, the Council was faced with a termination of its funds by July. Several possible alternatives were presented: another grant from Columbia Foundation, which seemed unlikely; a special community solicitation of funds; Community Chest participation or a return to former non-budgetary status. The Welfare Council of Los Angeles, made up of representatives of the Community Chest, recommended that the Council seek affiliation with the Los Angeles Tuberculosis and Health Association, and that if such was accomplished, a grant of $15,000 would be available for the Council's activities. This was in accord with the general recommendations of the Gunn-Platt report which suggested the consolidation of voluntary health agencies for the purpose of pooling resources, limiting the number of public appeals for funds, better distribution of expenditures, and for promotion of general health, not specific diseases.

Though there was some disagreement with this report by a member of its Advisory Committee, it was almost universally agreed that a venereal disease organization could not raise public funds independently, and should properly align with a larger health agency. The Los Angeles Tuberculosis and Health Association was reluctant to include the venereal diseases in its program, but after mature consideration and consultation with the Welfare Council and the California Social Hygiene Association, a
one year trial marriage was consummated on February 19, 1947. The offices of the Council's Executive Secretary were moved to the Tuberculosis Association and the Council suspended its activities in favor of a committee selected by the Executive Board of the Association. Just prior to this union, the Venereal Disease Council affiliated with the American Social Hygiene Association, and will, with the Tuberculosis Association's committee, serve as the local outlet of the American Social Hygiene Association.

It is believed that this change is a step forward for three reasons: (1) A certain organizational stability is gained; (2) the community standing of the Tuberculosis and Health Association lends prestige to venereal disease problems; and (3) the educational and promotional experience and equipment of that agency may be directed to study and combat the venereal diseases. However, certain undesirable elements are attached to this amalgamation, i.e., the enthusiasm that accompanies a new and unconventional organization is lost; the Council is yoked with the traditions, patterns, and dignity of an old and crystallized agency; and, due to administrative policy, those actively concerned with venereal disease control are removed from direct relationship with the new committee.

A story of pathfinding experience has been given. Welfare agencies of neighboring communities in Los Angeles County are seeking similar organizations. According to the American cus-

Some references are:

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