

# PUBLIC HEALTH IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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**History.**—The public health service of the Dominican Republic might well be called the oldest in America, since Hispaniola was the first European settlement in the new world. The island's first great medical problem was probably the severe epidemic of smallpox in 1519. However, before that time the first American hospital, San Nicolás, had already been founded, in Santo Domingo.

Constant attempts were made to improve the health of the colony. It had its physicians, and even a school of medicine in the University founded in 1538. In addition to hospitals, there were municipal physicians, among them such medical writers as Méndez Nieto, and Fernando Diez Leiva, author of "*Antiaxiomas médicos morales y filosóficos*" (Moral and Philosophical Medical Axioms), 1682. Diez Leiva was, according to the title page of his work, "physician of the city of Santo Domingo."

However, there was no specialized public health service either during the colonial period or during that of Haitian domination (1822 to 1844). Nor was such an organization created upon the establishment of the Republic in 1844, although the Government was always concerned with public health. After 1845 public health became a municipal responsibility. The law of municipal government of that year provided in articles 13 and 27 for sanitary police and cleanliness, the supervision of markets and food warehouses, the preparation and preservation of vaccine, precautionary measures against epidemics, improvement of streets and public *plazas*, and anything else which could contribute to public health and cleanliness, and finally, for the establishment of welfare institutions.

The police department had public health duties. The Police Ordinances of 1845 contained two chapters affecting health, I, Public Cleanliness and IV, Public Health. Furthermore, when epidemics threatened, boards of health were created, composed of the principal physicians of the country. During the annexation to Spain (1861 to 1865), continued progress was made in public health; there was a greater number of physicians, pharmacists, hospitals, health institutions and pharmacies. This situation lasted, with a few variations, through the laws and decrees of 1908, 1912 and 1915, until 1919.

**Secretariat of Health and Welfare.**—The necessity of having a powerful organization devoted entirely to the care of public health had as its natural consequence the creation of the Secretariat of State of Public Health and Welfare, which came into being through Executive Order No. 338 of October 13, 1919. This order also contained the regulations for the organization of the new department. At the present time the public health service functions under regulations adopted in January 1938. During the last few years the public health service has reached its maximum efficiency and has complied rigorously with the provisions of the excellent Code of Sanitary Procedure of 1938 (approved in December, 1937).

**Public Health Campaigns.**—The public health service has carried on its rural sanitation work through the provincial health authorities and through the 16 rural dispensaries of the Republic. Treatment is furnished for the endemic diseases of the area: malaria, hook-worm, syphilis, yaws and tropical ulcer.

**Tuberculosis.**—On Pan American Health Day, 1940, the National League Against Tuberculosis was installed. This organization is in charge of the cam-

paign against tuberculosis, and under the auspices of the Secretariat of Health and Welfare it has secured a considerable number of members and has been able to collect a large amount of money. This has been used to purchase equipment for the first tuberculosis hospital (100 beds), now almost completed.

**Child and Maternal Welfare.**—On January 5, 1941, the National Board of Maternal and Child Welfare, created by Law No. 367 of November 15, 1940, was inaugurated. Among its activities have been the installation of two milk stations, enlargement of the maternity ward of the Padre Billini Hospital to a capacity of 60 beds, construction of the Maternity Hospital of San Francisco de Macoris (30 beds), and enlargement of the Julia Molina Maternity Hospital (30 beds).

**Children's Hospital.**—The Ramfis Children's Hospital (150 beds) was inaugurated January 6, 1938 and is meeting a long-felt need, as the first children's hospital in the Republic.

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## HAITIAN EPIDEMICS

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Several severe *smallpox* epidemics occurred in Haiti during early times, including those in 1518, 1738, 1740 and 1741. Treatment in 1518 consisted chiefly in having patients bathe in the river. But in 1825, when another outbreak appeared, soldiers were ordered to be vaccinated. In 1881-1882 and 1920 Haiti was again severely stricken but it was only in 1920 that the people began to take seriously vaccination and isolation as a means of combating the disease.

The first cases of *yellow fever*, imported from Martinique, were reported in Haiti in 1691. Epidemics occurred in 1733, 1735, 1739, 1743, 1745 and 1746. Very severe were those in 1798, 1802, 1803 and 1804, according to such writers as Poissonier Desperrières, Ch. F. Roux, Victor Bally, Delmas, Descourtiz, Louis Joumaron and François Moulié. No further epidemics of yellow fever occurred in Haiti, although a few sporadic cases were reported from time to time, confined to the white colony. Dr. Georges Smith, first President of the Board of Health, wrote in 1861 that during the 20 years of his practice in Haiti, he never had a fatal case of yellow fever in a negro or in anyone with African blood and that although such individuals contracted the disease, they usually recovered very quickly.

Epidemics of *malaria* and of *typhoid*, sometimes difficult to distinguish without laboratory aid, have also been reported in Haiti, in 1739, 1742, 1744 and 1766. The independence of Haiti brought about no noticeable change in this regard. In 1817 and 1818 there was much malaria, and it was especially severe at Port-au-Prince. Alexandre Pétiou, founder of the Haitian Republic and friend of Simon Bolivar, died during this epidemic.

Among the endemic diseases which often proved fatal may be mentioned *mumps*, very common in 1740, (Pouppée Désportes), and *measles*, prevalent in 1741 (Damien Chevallier) and 1889. There were many cases of rabies in both dogs and humans in 1762, 1768 and 1852. An influenza epidemic, with pulmonary complications, occurred in 1852. Three years ago Port-au-Prince had its second epidemic of diphtheria since 1892, and in 1935 anthrax made its first serious appearance since 1775.