



Public Health Service officers examining immigrants arriving to Ellis Island.

Foundations of Public Health

Part I: Foundations of the Profession and Science of Public Health

HISTORY OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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Introduction

This course provides a review of the evolution of public health. We will see that efforts to avoid disease go back many centuries. Concepts of disease were relatively crude, and methods for promoting health were largely based on anecdote. Some recommendations and practices were ineffective, if not harmful, such as bloodletting and efforts to avoid the bubonic plague. However, other practices, such as the use of quarantine to control infectious disease, had merit. We will see the slow emergence of the need to record health events, and the evolution of systematic ways of thinking about the causes of disease and the introduction of increasingly effective interventions for control and prevention of disease. In the mid-1800's, there was the birth of the hygiene movement, particularly in the United Kingdom, with a focus on the environment and efforts to improve the health and well-being of the poor. Another leap forward occurred in the late 1800's with acceptance of the germ theory of infectious disease. The 20th century brought an explosion of research that produced many new treatments and preventive measures and a growing emphasis on personal behaviors to prevent both acute and chronic diseases. The module will conclude with an overview of the structure of the current public health system, with an emphasis on the United States.

Learning Outcomes

After completing this module, the student will be able to:

- Explain the evolution of concepts about the cause and prevention of disease.
- Describe the importance of studying the factors associated with outcomes in a systematic way in human populations.
- Discuss some of the major historical figures and events that played a role in the evolution of public health and epidemiology.
- Describe the overall structure of the public health system in the United States today.