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## Response to Reader Comments on The Beginning of Public Health in Michigan

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## **LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

### **Response to Reader Comments on *The Beginning of Public Health in Michigan*<sup>1</sup>**

Robert Mosher & G. Elaine Beane

The authors acknowledge that this series of articles is not going to be comparable to *The First 100 Years*, a publication of the Michigan Department of Public Health. *The First 100 Years* is a very valuable book, and the authors (Robert E. Mosher, PhD and G. Elaine Beane, PhD) each have a copy. Our approach is different from that of a government agency, that of historical researchers working from the original documents of the Michigan State Board of Health. Those documents include the annual reports, supplemental reports, segments written by MSBH members and their correspondents, reminiscences of MSBH clerks and assistants, memorials and eulogies on the deaths of MSBH members, autobiographies and biographies.

The authors have a strong interest in the “why” of MSBH decision-making, as well as the “how” of their actions. What were the external and internal factors that impinged on the assumptions, goals, and decision-making of the MSBH members? The original documents are interpreted in terms of the health environment as well as the cultural, economic, and political forces of the time period. In addition, the individual histories and personalities of the MSBH members are considered relevant to their involvement and decision-making while on the Board.

This series has an approach that attempts to show the circumstances, strengths, and challenges that surrounded the choices made by MSBH members, individually and collectively. They were trying to find solutions to horrendous public health problems but had few resources at their disposal. At times, their assumptions were incorrect -- according to our knowledge today -- and their reasoning led them to wrong conclusions. In another hundred years, the same may be said of our public health decisions. The cultural, economic, and political forces of our time influence public health no less than they did in the 1870's, but we do not always perceive their effects because they are built into our assumptions.

The need to tackle the problems of human health is no less today than it was in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The framework within which these problems are manifested has changed to some degree, but the basic needs -- clean water, clean air, clean nutritious food, and effective prevention of disease -- are the same. As populations increase worldwide and resources become scarce, our ability to keep our environment clean and improve human health becomes impaired. There are many lessons to be found in the history of the MSBH and its members. Perhaps by understanding them and their rationales a bit better, we can see some of our current dilemmas in a new light.

For example, the safe disposal of waste -- human, animal, and industrial -- is a permanent problem for human societies. The waste processing approaches that worked for the dispersed farms of the 1840's were insufficient for the growing towns and cities of 1875. Likewise the human and animal waste processing systems that worked for 1950s Michigan are inadequate for

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the populations and industries of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If we are not willing to invest in waste processing infrastructure, we will have an opportunity to reprise some of the diseases of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and invent some new ones.

