The Warren

Huntington Williams and Public Health Media FINAL

Born	George Huntington Williams, 1892
Died	1992
Residence	Baltimore, MD
Occupation	Commissioner of Public Health Department, 1933-1961

Contents

1 Early Education & Career

Medical training 1915-1919. Huntington Williams was inspired to work in the health field after the death of his father, George Huntington Williams, due to typhoid fever in 1894. He obtained his undergraduate degree from Harvard in 1915, and his medical degree from Johns Hopkins in 1919.

Doctorate in Public Health - 1921. William Henry Welch, dean of the school of medicine, was a close family friend of Williams and encouraged him to pursue a career in public health (Fee, 2011). With his guidance, Williams obtained a doctorate in public health in 1921. Williams' doctoral thesis was titled "Medical Work in the City Public Schools" and spanned 74 pages, evidencing his commitment to the partnership between medical professionals and the lay public (Williams 1921).

Internship/residency - 1921. After completing an internship at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal, Dr. Williams joined the state health department of New York.

First ten years in NY. Hermann Biggs, the state health commissioner in New York since 1914, was one of the most progressive health reformers of that time. Biggs was a mentor to Williams during the ten years that he worked in Albany (AJPH 1923) (Fee, 2011). During his tenure in New York, we saw early hints of the professional traits that would eventually come to define Williams. Not only did Williams start radio talks on health in 1921, but beginning in 1925, he personally visited the 57 leading cities of New York and took on the enormous task of assessing and grading the health conditions of each (Williams, 1927). His report of the scores, published in 1927, was a very early indication that Williams was committed to evaluating the effectiveness of public health initiatives in creating healthier cities. Ahead of his time, he placed an emphasis on measurable outcomes and showed a commitment to rigorous methodology.

2 Baltimore Beginnings (1930s)

Changes at the Baltimore Health Department. In 1930, Baltimore city's mayor, Howard Jackson was looking for a replacement for his elderly health commissioner. Welch recommended bringing in Williams to the Baltimore City Health Department as a Director in 1931 to groom him for the position of Commissioner (Fee, 2011). Hamson Jones, the elderly Health Commissioner, died in 1932, and Williams was promoted to Commissioner in 1933 (Baltimore Sun 1992).

Very quickly upon taking up in Baltimore, Huntington Williams acted on his instinct and desire to to make health education and promotion part of the norm for the Health Department. His personal motto was "Educate, Don't Legislate" (Fee, 1992). In accordance with this belief, Williams heavily emphasized education in Baltimore City through weekly radio programs, leaflets, newspapers, and the Baltimore Health News (Fee 2011). Certainly not by coincidence, the Health Department as a whole adopted a new motto around this time: "Learn to do your part in the prevention of disease" (Mooney), which represented a shift in the public health mindset to targeting individual behaviors. It should be noted that the department, "until the year before [1932]… did not even have a bureau of public health education through which to teach the city's inhabitants about prevention." According to Mooney, "in all likelihood the motto was the brainchild of new Health Commissioner [Williams], who used it as an epigraph to the annual report of this first full year in the post" (Mooney).

In fact, Williams believed that, "there is no single medium of mass health education in the United States of America so important and valuable as the extensively used radio and television broadcasting stations" (Williams, 1962). As a result, he was instrumental in developing the *Keeping Well* radio program, first a series of weekly 5-minute health talks (1932) which later became a series of weekly 15-minute health dramas (1939) (Mooney). The transcripts were made available to the public after broadcast. During this time, the American Medical Association began broadcasting its radio health talks in 1933 over NBC, and health departments in Michigan and New York were implementing health dramas with great success. This goes to show how Williams was "[using] the media brilliantly to promote the public's health" (Fee 2011) and layering a business-like approach to his medical and public health career. In many ways, Williams was treating health like an item of commerce, and he saw it as his personal responsibility to advertise this item to the people of Baltimore.

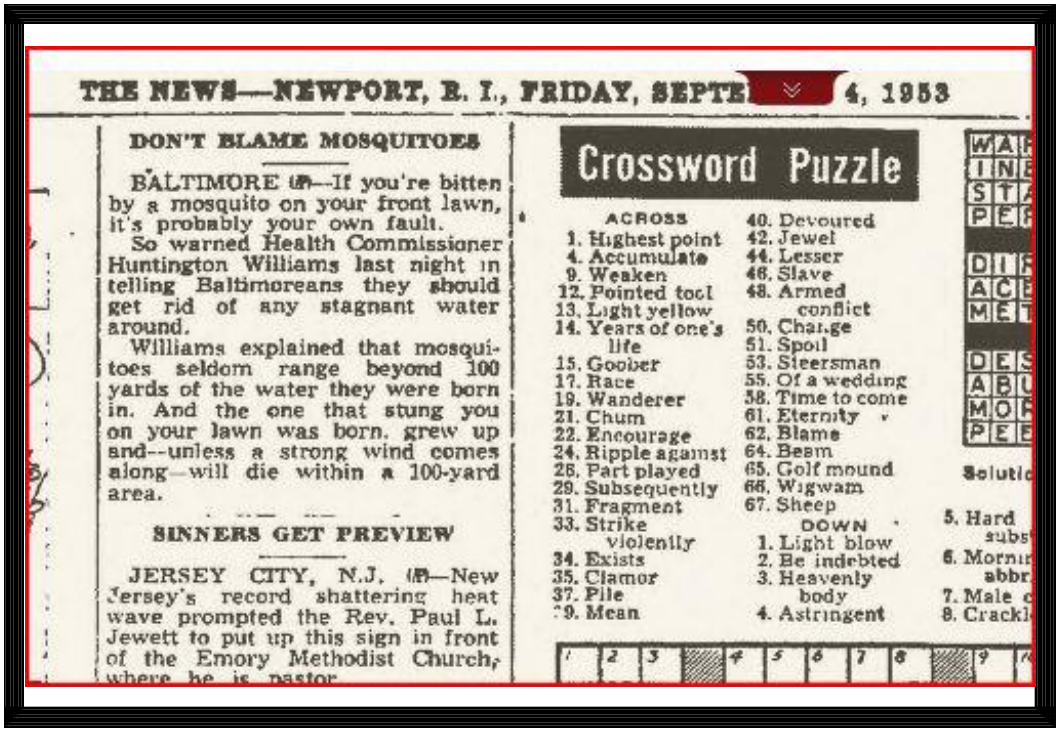
Williams was also a supporter of the establishment of the Eastern Health District, a collaboration between Johns Hopkins School of Public Health and the surrounding community ("History" 2014). Particularly due to his close relationship with Welch, the Dean of Hopkins School of Medicine who had mentored and "groomed him" throughout his career, this collaboration came quite naturally for Williams (Fee, 2011). He envisioned the Eastern Health District as a testing ground for new and developing public health initiatives, such as "prenatal care and well-baby clinics, medical care for recipients of public assistance, lead paint abatement, rat control, and rehabilitation of old and dilapidated housing" (Fee, 2011). In 1938, a syphilis clinic was established in the Eastern Health District as well ("History" 2014). Throughout this time, Williams defined himself with every passing month on the job as a progressive, passionate, and groundbreaking leader in public health.

Ideology. Williams' changing perspective on his role as the Health Commissioner can be evidenced by his publications during his tenure. While he was active in media intended for public consumption, such as the Baltimore Health News and radio programs, he also continued to publish for an academic or practitioner audience. His early works were more traditional in nature, chronicling an unusual case of lead poisoning (Williams, Schulze, Rothchild, Brown, & Smith, 1933) or diptheria prevention and treatment efforts in Baltimore (Weinzirl & Williams 1934). However, by the 1940s, Williams branched out and began incorporating environmental influences on health into his work. He published "Public Health and Urban Planning" in 1943, which was soon followed by several pieces about the Baltimore Plan (Williams & Schulze 1948) and the piece "Housing Law Enforcement and the City Health Department's Attack on Slums" (Williams & Schulze 1948). Williams continued his publications in the area of housing with "Better Housing Law Enforcement and the 'Baltimore Plan'" in 1950.

3 Settling in as Commissioner and Making Changes (1940s)

Williams' Legislative Approach and The Warren. By 1940, the Baltimore City Health Department, led by Williams, was sponsoring weekly radio shows, such as the Keeping Well Radio Drama, featuring the episode titled "The Warren". The main character, Dr. Dick Ashley, is sometimes thought of as Williams' alter ego in his attempts to educate the other characters about public health issues. Housing conditions were an enormous problem in the slums of Baltimore, and "The Warren" was just one part of "a widespread education campaign" (AJPH 1950). Not long after "The Warren" described the Prince Albert Court as "rotten with disease," the city passed the Ordinance on the Hygiene of Housing in 1941 (AJPH 1950).

Moreover, Baltimore City was one of the leaders in lead abatement in the country, thanks to Williams (Markowitz & Rosner). In 1932, there was increased awareness of the dangers of lead poisoning after children exposed to burning discarded storage battery casings were brought to Hopkins for the treatment of convulsions and unconsciousness (Williams, Schulze, Rothchild, Brown, & Smith, 1933). After that incident, educational campaigns, and lead abatement programs were started through the city health department. By making Baltimore aware of this public health issue, the city was able to pass laws to protect children from lead poisoning. Baltimore in fact passed some of the first paint-labeling laws in the country.



THE NEWS—NEWPORT, R. I., FRIDAY, SEPTE[illegible] 4, 1953

DON'T BLAME MOSQUITOES

BALTIMORE (AP)—If you're bitten by a mosquito on your front lawn, it's probably your own fault.

So warned Health Commissioner Huntington Williams last night in telling Baltimoreans they should get rid of any stagnant water around.

Williams explained that mosquitoes seldom range beyond 100 yards of the water they were born in. And the one that stung you on your lawn was born, grew up and--unless a strong wind comes along—will die within a 100-yard area.

SINNERS GET PREVIEW

JERSEY CITY, N.J. (AP)—New Jersey's record shattering heat wave prompted the Rev. Paul L. Jewett to put up this sign in front of the Emory Methodist Church, where he is pastor.

Crossword Puzzle

ACROSS
1. Highest point
4. Accumulate
9. Weaken
12. Pointed tool
13. Light yellow
14. Years of one's life
15. Goober
17. Race
19. Wanderer
21. Chum
22. Encourage
24. Ripple against
26. Part played
29. Subsequently
31. Fragment
33. Strike violently
34. Exists
35. Clamor
37. Pile
39. Mean
40. Devoured
42. Jewel
44. Lesser
46. Slave
48. Armed conflict
50. Charge
51. Spoil
53. Steersman
55. Of a wedding
58. Time to come
61. Eternity
62. Blame
64. Beam
65. Golf mound
66. Wigwam
67. Sheep

DOWN
1. Light blow
2. Be indebted
3. Heavenly body
4. Astringent

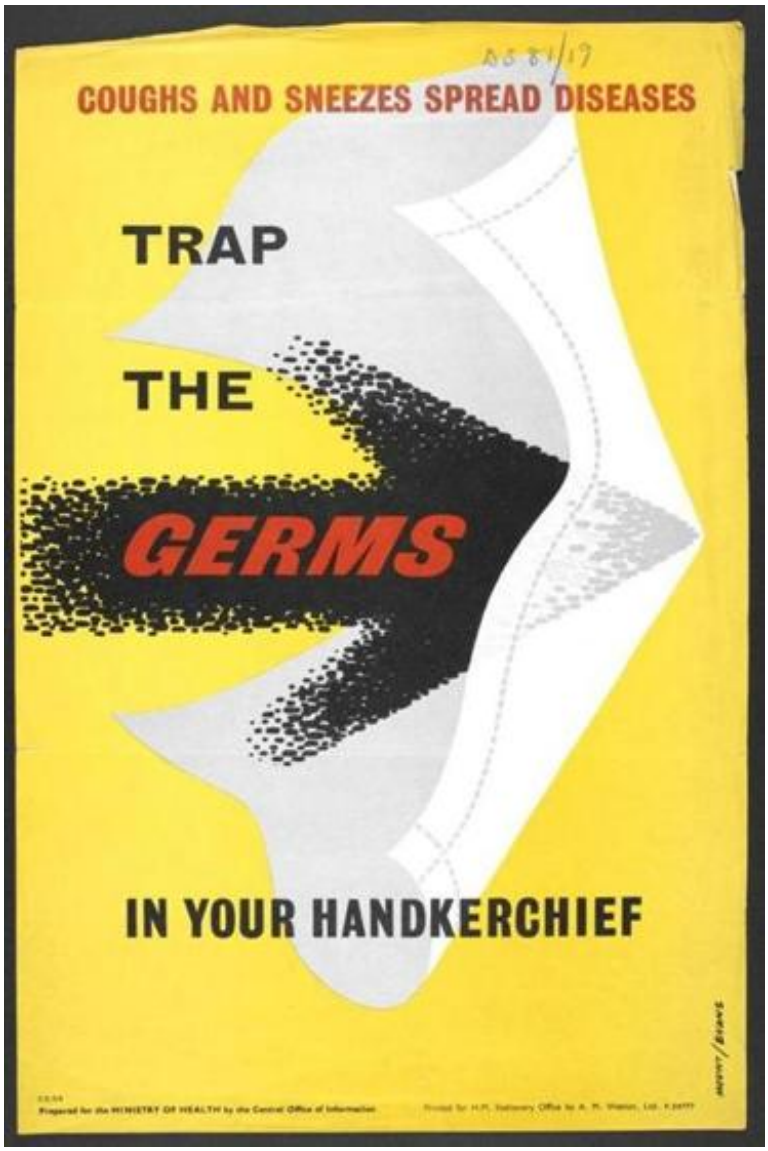
Housing Issues and the Baltimore Plan. By the 1940s, it was clear that the existing regulations were not sufficient to protect the children of Baltimore from the perils of lead paint. The health department needed more authority to be able to act when lead paint in homes was causing an immediate threat. The Ordinance on the Hygiene of Housing allowed the health commissioner to require lead abatement in homes that were deemed “dangerous or detrimental to life or health” (Markowitz & Rosner).

Without a doubt, the city of Baltimore was making great strides to protect the health of its residents, with Williams demonstrating “indefatigable leadership” (Williams 1950) and directing these progressive public health efforts. The rest of the nation started to take notice of the sweeping improvements in Baltimore, especially in regard to the program adopted in 1949 for the improvement of housing conditions in the slum districts of the city. At this time, the Housing Commissioner became directly responsible to the city’s Commissioner of Health, and as the mayor at the time phrased it, “We have here the first approach of its kind in the country, and perhaps the world” (AJPH 1950). This approach certainly earned “widespread national attention” and, though there were later both compliments and criticisms of the Baltimore Plan, it is clear that the initiative allowed Williams and his health department to “mitigate the grosser evils of a bad situation” (AJPH 1950). The department now had oversight into an area previously not under its jurisdiction, and this set the trend across the nation of this type of intervention, on behalf of people’s health, to be possible.

Limitations of public health messaging. Williams promoted individual responsibility in his public health messaging, but the harshness of his approach sometimes bordered on paternalistic. For example, the "Don't Blame Mosquitoes" clipping (left) warns that, "If you're bitten by a mosquito on your front lawn, it's probably your own fault."

Some believed early on that the public health ads were not helpful, even writing critically, "Even if all the physical barriers to communication were known and removed there would remain many psychological barriers to the free flow of ideas" (Hyman & Sheatsley, 1947).

4 Concluding Remarks



Williams' 1962 reflection "Health Education by Television". Throughout his career, Williams continued to use mass media as a tool to create an informed and engaged citizenry. With television eclipsing radio as an entertainment source during his tenure as Health Commissioner, Williams led the Baltimore City Health Department in incorporating television shorts entitled "Your Family Doctor" into regular television programming in Baltimore in 1948. In contrast to the cutting-edge nature of this venture, the American Medical Association did not begin its foray into television programming until 1950 (Williams 1962) .

In 1962, Williams had retired as Health Commissioner and was invited to give a Chadwick Public Lecture in London, England on July 20, 1962. Having published an article on the importance of Edwin Chadwick (Williams 1956), a British public health physician who focused on environmental and sanitary conditions' contributions to disease in the mid-1800s, Williams was well-positioned to give the lecture. He decided to deliver the speech, "Health Education by Television," which was so well-received that an abridged version of it was published four months later in the *Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health* (Williams 1962).

In his speech, Williams described public health media campaigns as responsible for the advancement of the "Great Sanitary Awakening" in American society, and purported that "there is no single medium of mass health education so important and valuable as the extensive current use of the radio and television broadcasting stations" (Williams 1962). He describes the Baltimore City Health Department's pioneering work in radio, starting in 1932, and in television, beginning in 1948, and the support that the department received from the local stations, which donated air time free of charge (Williams 1962). He boasted that the Baltimore scripts were sent to Hawai'i, Australia, Nigeria, and other places to be replicated for those local audiences.

In this speech, Williams reflected on the purpose of the media campaigns: to promote preventative and curative health efforts. However, he also claimed that creating the media campaigns, which also enlisted the expertise of medical professionals as well as the health department, brought the two professions closer and ensured that they were aligned in their messaging (Williams 1962).

In his media initiatives, like most all his work, Williams demonstrated a staunch commitment to health education and promotion. Even now, nearly a century removed, his mantra of "Educate, Don't Legislate" echoes in the minds of public health professionals everywhere. Especially in Baltimore, Williams is a man whose work has been stitched into the very fabric of the city and whose impact, in the form of public health programs and polices, touches lives to this day.

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Comments

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