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# The Women's Local Government Society.

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## The Work of a Public Health Committee.

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A Borough or Urban District Council is the Public Health Authority for its own area and is responsible for the administration of what are known as the Public Health Acts, *i.e.*, the first great "Public Health Act of 1875" and some sixty or seventy subsequent measures.

It is however usual for both Borough and Urban Councils to appoint a Standing Committee, called either the Sanitary Committee or the Public Health Committee, to undertake these duties, to report their proceedings for confirmation by the Council, and to make recommendations.

The Medical Officer of Health is the chief official of the Public Health Department. The number of Assistant M.O.H's., of Sanitary Inspectors, Health Visitors, etc., depends on the size and population of the municipality or district.

### **Infectious Disease.**

The most outstanding duty of a Public Health Committee is the control of Infectious Diseases. Every case of Smallpox, Scarlet Fever, Typhoid, Diphtheria, etc., must be immediately reported to the Medical Officer of Health. If the case cannot be nursed at home without risk of infection to the public, the patient must be removed to an Isolation Hospital, which is usually provided by the Local Authority; and the home premises and clothing, bedding and other articles must be disinfected. The Medical Officer of Health should spare no pains to try and trace the origin of an outbreak of disease and should report to his Committee on what is called the "behaviour" of the epidemic, the number of cases, the proportion of deaths, what streets or localities are specially affected, what climatic conditions prevailed, the period since the last outbreak, and so on.

As a result of all this careful work the present generation knows nothing of the terrors of those devastations which periodically swept the country in the "good old days."

Pamphlet

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In recent years Measles has proved more fatal than most of the other infectious diseases put together, and as this complaint has now been made notifiable, it is beginning to receive fuller attention from Public Health Committees, almost to the same extent as Tuberculosis. Facilities for the free treatment of Venereal Disease are now provided.

**Vital  
Statistic.**

The Public Health Department receives notice of all Births, Deaths and the cause of death. The Committee compare the figures for the year with those of other years and with similar returns from other districts; they note whether Infantile Mortality is high or low, whether it is higher among illegitimate children, whether the number of these is increasing; what diseases caused most deaths among the population; and all these and other statistics are considered in the light of local knowledge as to conditions of housing, employment and other factors.

Such study will show ambitious and enthusiastic members of a Committee what has been and what can be accomplished by the adoption of wise and energetic measures. These statistics are moreover a valuable thermometer of the health of the district.

**Maternity  
and Infant  
Welfare.**

Every enlightened Public Health Committee regard their work in relation to Maternity and Infant Welfare as one of their most important concerns.

Beginning with the care of the expectant mothers, following on with arrangements for home visitation by tactful and sympathetic Health Visitors, and by the establishment of Maternity and Infant Clinics and of Welfare Centres,—it should be possible to ensure that advice and help are available for every mother, and that the children are under observation until they are five years old and receive the benefit of the School Medical Service. It is difficult to over-estimate the saving of life and the improvement in health which will be effected when all Public Health Authorities have complete schemes in full working order for Maternity and Infant Welfare.

**Sewers and  
Drains.**

Public Health Authorities in towns are themselves bound to provide Sewers, but it is their further duty to see that every house has proper drains communicating with the Sewer or emptying into a covered cess-pool. They must not only make sure that all house drains are of proper size and material, but by constant testing they should ensure that these drains are kept clean and in good repair.

The disposal of Sewage is often one of the most anxious problems of the Health Committee, and as yet there seems no general agreement as to the best of several rival methods of treatment.

**Dust.**

The Collection and disposal of dust and "refuse" is another of the Public Services under the Health Committee. The old-fashioned brick ash-pit, which was only emptied at long intervals and could never be properly cleansed, has now been almost entirely abolished and the sanitary zinc dust-bin has been substituted. Weekly collections from dwelling houses and daily collections from shops are now customary; and in some districts that most desirable thing, a daily collection from houses, has also been established.

**Housing.**

The Regulations respecting housing requirements vary somewhat in different towns, but practically all authorities now insist that dwelling houses shall not only have proper drains but that water shall be laid on, that cisterns shall be of suitable material, that water closets and sinks shall be properly constructed, that walls shall be dry, staircases safe, yards paved, a certain amount of air space allowed, and no new houses built back to back. To secure compliance with these and other elementary requirements in thickly populated working-class districts involves constant house-to-house visitation by vigilant Sanitary Inspectors, and they in turn require the support of an alert and conscientious Committee. Perhaps the least satisfactory part of the work of any Authority is the endeavour to prevent over-crowding, and to get even a low degree of cleanliness and repair maintained in tenements rented by the class below that of the ordinary self-respecting artisan. The problems involved are notoriously difficult and intricate, and the laws are inadequate.

**Clean Food.** To ensure cleanliness in food, various measures have been passed enabling Public Health Committees—

To seize unsound fish, meat, poultry and fruit.

To take samples of food for analysis with a view to the detection of adulteration.

To inspect cow-sheds and dairies, slaughter houses, butchers' shops, and bakeries.

More drastic measures are however still needed, before, for instance, a satisfactory supply of clean milk can be obtained.

**Other Matters.** Other important duties of Public Health Authorities include the following—

The prevention of the pollution of rivers.

The regulation of van dwellings and of underground rooms and canal boats used as dwellings.

The control of smoky chimneys.

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- The registration of lodging houses.
- The cleansing of verminous persons and the disinfection of bedding, clothing, etc.
- The restriction of offensive Trades, such as soap-boiling and tallow melting.

Even this list by no means exhausts the work of a Public Health Committee, but it is perhaps sufficient to indicate its very wide sphere of usefulness to the community.

**Conclusion.** Public Health work is an essential part of national reconstruction. It is therefore of the utmost importance that at the next elections women should obtain seats on every Local Authority, so that they may co-operate with the men Councillors in the improvement of housing conditions and home surroundings, in problems of milk supplies and food control, in arrangements for safeguarding the health of mothers and the welfare of infants and children, and in other matters which are especially the concern of women.

S. M. SMEE,

*Chairman of Public Health Committee, 1912-14, and 1916-18.*

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