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St. Clair County Health Department-Opinion Editorial Public Health Saves Lives

I remind myself daily, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”. As I approach 15 years working in public health, I’m in awe of the vital role the field has played in human history. Many privileges we often take for granted in modern life have been afforded to us by the work of public health. Consider these noteworthy achievements.

Through the use of vaccines, public health virtually eliminated diseases like smallpox and nearly eliminated the wild polio virus. The number of people who experienced the devastating effects of preventable infectious diseases like measles, diphtheria, and whooping cough is at an all-time low.

Public health regulations set standards that necessitated safer and healthier workplaces for coal miners and the entire workforce. From 1933 through 1997, deaths from unintentional work-related injuries declined 90%.

Public health contributed to the elimination of foodborne infections. Contaminated food and water resulted in many foodborne infections in the early 20th century. Advances, such as refrigeration, pasteurization, pest and animal control, and food safety regulations promoting better hygiene and sanitation practices all contributed to decreases in foodborne infections.

Public health recognized tobacco as a health hazard. The Public Health Cigarette Smoking Act of 1969 set laws requiring a health warning on cigarette packages, banned cigarette advertising in the broadcast media, and called for an annual report on the health consequences of smoking.

Public health interventions have resulted in 30 years of increased life expectancy over the past century, 25 years of this gain are attributable to advances in public health.

As a physician devoted to the preservation and improvements of life, the ability to play a role in that process is a privilege indeed, however I could not do it alone! This work is not just mine, but rather ours. I encourage you to reflect on the role public health has had on your life whether it be reducing your risk of illness through vaccines, a seatbelt protecting you in a car accident, or the assurance that the restaurant you are dining in has been inspected. Public health touches you every minute of every day and in turn makes our community stronger and more resilient.

As we celebrate National Public Health Week, April 4-10, let’s help our families, friends, neighbors, co-workers and leaders better understand the value of public health and supporting opportunities to adopt preventive lifestyle habits in light of this year’s theme, “*Public Health is Where You Are.*” On behalf of entire health department team, we encourage everyone to step in and do what they can to make our world a more equitable, safe, healthy and just place. In addition, next time you see a public health worker, share a big smile and a warm thank you.

Yours in health,

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