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Research Methods and Primary Sources: Writing the History of your Public Health Laboratory

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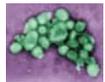
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Objective

To write the history of the Nebraska Public Health Laboratory (NPHL)



The significance of knowing the laboratory's history not only centered around legacy knowledge for the laboratory, but also provided important information on the history of how public health grew and was enforced in Nebraska, especially concerning reportable diseases and specimen collection.



Study Design

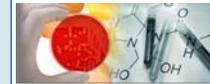


To create any laboratory history, you must start with primary source documents. Our historical survey used field notes from public health inspectors (even as far back as early-statehood), disease reporting databases collected by the state health department and a variety of government documents pertaining to guidelines surrounding reportable diseases and procedures for specimen collection and proper testing techniques. The annual reports of the State Department of Health were also examined.

Historical Timeline



- 1891: State Board of Health established
- **1913: State Public Health Lab established** – initially called the Bacteriological Lab
- **QUARANTINE** 1918: the Great Influenza
- 1939: the State conducts major tuberculosis study
- 1943: the State first establishes local public health departments
- 1952: Nebraska reports record cases of polio
- 1972: Nebraska closes state tuberculosis hospital
- 1997: Lab moves from Lincoln to Omaha – now formally called the Nebraska Public Health Laboratory
- 2001: National Anthrax outbreak
- 2003: West Nile Virus invades Nebraska
- 2009: Influenza virus H1N1 Pandemic



Results



Deciphering the history of the NPHL was challenging but much was learned regarding the role the laboratory played in the process of public health in Nebraska. The correlation of significant health occurrences (e.g., the importance of tuberculosis in the state highlighted by a 1939 study, the rise of polio in 1952) with reporting/laboratory activities was done which showed how these topics have always, and will continue to be, the confirmation health officials need when making appropriate decisions about the public's health.

Conclusion

The challenges of tracing a laboratory's history are many and can prove to be a difficult puzzle to solve. However, the knowledge obtained with this research can provide insight into the importance of the role the public health laboratory played. With new diseases appearing and old ones emerging, the laboratory will continue to play a significant role in the future of the public's health.

References

Nebraska State Historical Society Archives; McGoogan Library of Medicine Archives, Centers for Disease Control & Prevention Public Health Image Library, Kearney Hub, Public Health Reports, Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services