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

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

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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

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