

## **What is Public Health?**

by Elizabeth Kizer, Apache County Public Health Director  
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Public Health surrounds us everyday. Public Health is everything from clean drinking water to first responders. Nearly everything in public space is public health. The unique thing about Public Health is that it focuses on helping and protecting whole communities, while private doctors focus on individual patients.

London's 1854 Cholera epidemic gives us an example of why public health is necessary. An epidemic occurs when many people are infected with a particular disease in a particular place. In 1849 John Snow thought that Cholera was spread through dirty food or water. Before he proposed this radical idea, people thought diseases were spread by inhaling "contaminated vapors." Snow had no way to prove his theory. Technology could not examine what we now know is bacteria.

In 1854 people were dying of Cholera. Snow used this epidemic to test his theory. He conducted an *epidemiological* investigation. This simply means he plotted the locations of deaths on a map. He also interviewed families. He was looking for a common factor in all the deaths. Eventually he tracked down the culprit. Sewage was getting into the city water supply. The solution? He convinced officials to remove the handle of the pump that was supplying the dirty water. By doing so he got rid of the source of bacteria from the environment.

Public Health does more today than remove handles from pumps, but the idea is the same. Studies are made by public health officials (such as the Center for Disease Control, the US Department of Agriculture, or locally at the Arizona Department of Health Services). Measures are then put into place that will protect people from harm or ill health.

Public Health measures are also started by innovation in private industry. Around 1900 most people travelled by horse. Horses caused unsanitary streets and air pollution. When the automobile was invented it was sold as an environmentally friendly, clean alternative to travel by beast. The invention of the automobile solved the concerns of the day, but lead to other public health concerns 100 years later. Today new technology is being developed to solve the public health problems of travel by gasoline.

Apache County is committed to protecting and improving the health of our communities. We are even conscious of our choices when making purchases. Twice now, we have added a Toyota Prius to our fleet instead of a gas guzzling alternative. At 50 MPG, the Prius is a great example of Public Health!

Apache County is also committed to educating our community on the benefits of public health. If Public Health is working properly it is almost invisible. For instance, people are not getting sick, are not dying in car accidents, and are flushing away sewage.

Perhaps this is why people have a hard time answering the question, “What is public health?”

This article will be the first in a six-part series. The White Mountain Independent has graciously agreed to publish these articles over the next six months. We feel it is important to highlight the many important faces of public health. Until next month, see how many ways you can answer the question, “What is Public Health?” And, if you have a chance, check out this website: <http://www.whatispublichealth.org/>