

GOOD HEALTH HITS THE ROAD



Glynn County Health Commissioner Millard E. Winchester, M.D., far left, and two health department nurses welcome Brunswick dignitaries for a day of free health tests at the offices of the health department, located on Newcastle Street across from the historic Oglethorpe Hotel in this circa 1940 photograph.

Photos courtesy Susan Winchester Horton

by Amy H. Carter

There is no new thing under the sun, a Biblical proverb that rings true in all things, but especially in the fight to protect the human race from infectious diseases.

Take the recent rise in reported cases of syphilis in Glynn County, an irony given the praises the community earned for its fight to eradicate the disease 70 years ago.

A scourge of the human race said to have been introduced to Europe upon Columbus' return from the New World, syphilis was only brought under some semblance of control in the 20th Century when penicillin was invented. In 1937 Glynn County's Public Health Department rolled out its "bad-blood wagon," a mobile testing unit staffed by doctors and nurses that traveled to the rural reaches of Glynn, Camden and McIntosh counties to preach the gospel of good health to a population that constituted half of all known local cases of syphilis.

An epidemic on par with malaria and tuberculosis at that time, it cost the county economically and emotionally, contributing to a high rate of stillbirth.

Led by a physician Collier's magazine described in 1939 as a "cherubic little crusader" for public health, the local health department and its commissioner, Dr. Millard E. Winchester, were applauded by United States Surgeon General Dr. Thomas Parran for "doing the finest piece of health work in syphilis eradication that is being done in this country today." Doctors from

GLYNN COUNTY BOARD OF HEALTH
Cooperating with
THE GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH
and
THE U. S. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE ... HAS A PROGRAM
to

PREVENT GONORRHEA

(THE CLAP)

1. Do not have sexual intercourse outside of marriage.
2. A rubber condom worn by the man protects both man and woman from gonorrhea and syphilis.
3. Sulfathiazole pills not only cure, but if taken before sexual intercourse, will help prevent gonorrhea.
4. Men in armed forces who have been exposed to the disease should report immediately to the nearest prophylactic station.
5. If you have had sexual intercourse with a person who may have gonorrhea, go to your family doctor at once or to your Board of Health Clinic at 1504 Richmond Street.

CLINICS OPEN DAILY
8:00 A. M. to 5:00 P. M.
M. E. WINCHESTER, M. D., Commissioner of Health

around the country and all over the world – the Far East, South Africa, South America and Europe – wrote to Winchester seeking the secrets of his success in controlling the disease.

And now, exactly 70 years later, comes a warning of the risks of letting your guard down: Between 2007 and 2008, the incidence of syphilis in Glynn County doubled. According to statistics provided by the health department, Glynn County counts 7.9 percent of the 697 cases reported in Georgia in 2007.

"I don't think anybody truly knows the total reason for that, we just want to make sure it doesn't continue," says Sharon G. Smith, health services program manager for the Glynn County Health Department.

A sexually transmitted disease that is easily prevented through abstinence or protected sex, syphilis has never really gone away.

"For the most part, 75 percent of counties in the United States have no syphilis," says Dr. Richard Rothenberg, professor for the Institute of Public Health at Georgia State University. "Forty percent of the disease is found in 15 major metropolitan areas. There are occasional outbreaks in rural areas. Colleges in North Carolina had the biggest outbreak recently. There are these episodes that do occur. It's the same with tuberculosis. We're not seeing huge cases."

But to ensure that all that are out there are accounted for and treated, Sharon and her staff are taking the fight against syphilis back to the streets in a trailer pulled by a truck, announced by bold red letters printed on signs staked in the ground: "Free STD Testing." Purchased a few years ago with federal funds released to build a response to bioterrorism, the trailer has proven a useful tool in the fight against a more old-fashioned threat.

What goes around truly does come around, from diseases to the tactics used to fight them. **C**