

REPORT OF THE DIVISION OF EPIDEMIOLOGY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

1926-27

This office was created by the Commissioner of Health to make more effective the collection of morbidity reports in relation to the prevalence of communicable diseases throughout the Island, to analyze and interpret the figures obtained, to make special epidemiological investigations of disease outbreaks, to carry on certain research problems related to public health and to act in an advisory capacity in other activities of the Department of Health, such as Municipal Health Units, two of which have already been established.

Upon taking possession of his office the epidemiologist was entrusted with the organization of the first Municipal Health Unit at Río Piedras. Preferent attention is given to the study and control of communicable diseases, school medical inspection, tuberculosis control, infant and maternal hygiene, and sanitation, both in the urban and rural zones. This unit is also being used by the Health Department as a training base for health officers, nurses and sanitary inspectors.

The epidemiologist spent about six months in the organization of this unit and later returned to his post of duty in the Department of Health.

Beginning July 1st a new system of collecting morbidity reports was instituted. The epidemiologist was appointed Collaborating Epidemiologist of the United States Public Health Service and special cards with free postage were furnished by the Federal Government.

The main characteristics of the new system are as follows:

Every Physician is furnished with five cards and a circular letter with instructions. The data requested are simple, so that six cases may be reported on the same card.

In those municipalities where the Department of Health has in operation either Municipal Health Units or District Health Offices, the reports are made directly to the respective medical officers who immediately make an investigation and take the necessary measures to prevent the spread of disease. In the other municipalities the reports are made directly to the central office at San Juan. In places where the reports are made to the medical officers they return the

cards daily to the central office after having obtained the information requested. Then a blank card is returned to the physician, so that he has always in stock a supply of five cards at least.

Each physician is asked to sign and return a blank card every Monday morning even if he has nothing to report during the previous week. This indicates that the physician had no cases under his care, otherwise there would be doubt as to whether he merely failed to make a report.

In the central office at San Juan a record of morbidity is kept for every municipality so that at any time we are aware as to the prevalence of disease in any municipality.

With the inauguration of this new system the number of cases reported is very encouraging. The new organization is only in operation in the sanitary districts of San Juan and Humacao, which includes thirty municipalities with 170 practicing physicians.

We are not in a position, as yet, to establish a comparison of the reports with those of last year, but we can assure that about eighty per cent of the physicians are reporting regularly in the towns outside San Juan and about forty per cent in San Juan. Previous to the establishment of this new system practically no reports were received from the physicians and morbidity statistics were based only on the reports received from the laboratory.

No large epidemics which deserved special investigation developed during the time the epidemiologist has been holding office. Two small typhoid outbreaks occurred and were carefully investigated. One took place at Barranquitas during the month of June. The cases, eight in number, were among the people living in one of the suburbs about two miles outside the city limits. This outbreak was attributed to drinking polluted water from a nearby creek.

The other outbreak developed at Moca, a municipality located on the northwestern section of the Island. The cases were among the people of one of the rural districts known as Cuebillas. Of the twenty-two cases reported and visited twenty were definitively attributed to contact with a previous case. The mortality during this outbreak was high due apparently to the poverty of the people and to the lack of medical attention.

Recommendations have been made by this office concerning the organization of the work related to the study and control of communicable diseases on the Island.

In those places where the Department of Health has a Municipal

Health Unit the study and control of these diseases of course is one of the major activities of the Unit.

In those municipalities where the Department had district health officers, this office has recommended that a nurse for communicable diseases be added to the personnel of the local health office. This nurse together with the district health officer will be in charge, besides the investigation of the origin of an epidemic, of the quarantine of cases the isolation of contacts, the supervision of carriers and all other activities to prevent the spread of disease.

We hope in the coming year to be able to do some research work on tropical epidemiology in connection with the School of Tropical Medicine recently established at San Juan.

