

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH CARE IN BOHEMIA

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SUMMARY

Following the introductory informative consideration of the conception of public health in different countries, the author quotes the first reports on public health service in the history of the "Kingdom of Bohemia". In the following text he considers the development of this service, emphasizes the role of the National Institute of Public Health and gives a survey of its brief history until its reestablishment on January 1, 1992.

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If we want to look closely at the health of the population, the interest of the state in public health and health policy in general, we necessarily come across the concept of public health care. Naturally, we should know what this concept represents. What is the definition of public health care? The basic considerations aimed at a definition seem logical and clear. If the state wants to carry out its health policy so as to make it serve the public, it must form a system that would safeguard it. The fact that such systems are different in different countries and on a different level of the organizational and functional development, that they often change and always look for new ways, show that the overall problem of public health care is not simple. Consequently there are more definitions of public health care just as there are more opinions.

As the most competent organization the World Health Organization has been dealing with the issues of public health for a long time and in great detail and we should therefore start with the definition formulated by the respective experts of WHO. Certain inaccuracies, however, cannot be disregarded resulting from various approaches to the translation and explanation of the term Public Health. This term is difficult to translate into Czech or German and some other languages in a way that would unambiguously explain the English meaning. WHO defines Public Health as a science and art dealing with the prevention of diseases, prolongation of life and improvement of health through the organized endeavour of society. There are some reservations concerning this definition, since – according to some opponents – no sufficient emphasis is placed on the influence of the environment on health.

It results from what has been said that public health care cannot be solved by a mere adoption of foreign systems. These systems must reflect the needs and the levels of the social and economic development of individual states and at the same time be based on

- the knowledge of the people's state of health and their needs,
- the safeguarding of a health care system capable of securing an effective service for the prevention of diseases and a support and protection of health,
- the formulation of corresponding priorities and aims,
- a continuous monitoring of health and the results of the care thereof.

What then is the situation in our lands?

Should we decide to start with the foundation of independent Czechoslovakia after the First World War, it would

have to be recalled that at that time health care was carried out by the Ministry of Public Health and Physical Education. It was therefore simple in that the health care sector was public as expressed in the name of the Ministry. Looking at the beginnings of public health efforts takes us back to an even more distant history, when "the lands of the Czech Crown" underwent their historical development. In the first volume of a series published under the title "Report on Health Conditions in the Kingdom of Bohemia" (H. Pelc, 1892), Austrian health laws and ordinances were quoted including interesting information that "the Czech Assembly passed a resolution in 1585 urging the Imperial Chamber to allocate an annual sum of money to four especially skillful physicians, who as *physici regni* should have their seat in different parts of the country, should note the first symptoms of the outbreak of general disease among people, prevent its spreading and notify the authorities thereof". The material mentions even their names and places of work so that historians rightly consider it as the beginning of the development of public health care in Bohemia. The number of these public health officials gradually increased (in a certain historical period they were called *magistri sanitatis*), until it reached about 75 in 1892. They had their assistants and were supervised by the Provincial Health Council. Dr. H. Pelc comments on them as follows (1892): "... these physicians have introduced hygienic measures in communities, urging them usually without opposition to work effectively and according to local conditions and material means to strive to solve health care problems and partly carry out the solutions." They paved the way to a perceptible progress both in towns and in the country.

It should be stated here that it was always military health care that led all professional and organizational endeavours in the sphere of public health. The institution of military medical police was active in the Austrian army as early as in the 1820s. Vaccination against smallpox was carried out already during the Napoleonic wars.

By the time of the conclusion of the historical era of the Kingdom of Bohemia, after the disintegration of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire and the foundation of independent Czechoslovakia in 1918, the foundations of public health care enjoyed a comparatively good tradition. It is only logical that the term "Public Health" appeared also in the name of the Ministry of the First Republic. The individual sectors of its structure registered a fast development. Bacteriological and