

It is the legal duty of an attending medical practitioner to notify the authorities when they diagnose an infectious disease but this was not always so. Until 1889 there was no obligation to do this and thus neither the government or the medical profession had any information on the extent of epidemic or endemic disease. The only information that was available was that provided by the death certificate which came under the Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages Act of 1834.

Infectious diseases, a fact of life for centuries, were accepted as inevitable. A census carried out by the Registrar General's Office in 1851 showed that one in three deaths was due to infectious disease which at that time were generally known as 'fevers'. The real causes and modes of transmission of most of these diseases were not known until the bacteriological breakthrough of the last two decades of the 19C and the first two decades of the 20C.

The first Act of Parliament to address what we now know as public health was the Removal of Nuisances and the Prevention of Infectious Diseases Act 1846. This Act was variously amended and re-titled over the next ten years. Overflowing cess-pools, defective drains, accumulations of waste and rubbish all contributed to the smells which were equated to disease. These were regarded as 'nuisances' and this word entered the legal language. Local authorities were given powers to inspect premises and remove nuisances of any kind. Burial grounds also came within their purview some of which by that time had become overcrowded and malodorous. The General Board of Health was authorised to take appropriate action if any part of the Kingdom was threatened by epidemic disease.

The incidence of disease was reduced by the implementation of these Acts but with the continual threat of epidemic disease and the inability to collect information about them Parliament passed the Infectious Disease(Notification) Act, 1889. This Act, if adopted by local authorities, made notification compulsory. The diseases listed were smallpox, cholera, diphtheria, membranous croup, erysipelas and the fevers, typhus, typhoid, enteric, relapsing, continuing and puerperal. Measles and whooping cough were added later.

The Infectious Disease(Prevention) Act of 1890 added to the list 'any disease to which the Act might be applied by the local authority'.

The public were informed about the Acts by displaying posters and distributing handbills. Those who could read passed on the information to the less literate. The notices included definitions of the diseases, cleansing, disinfection, burials, detention in hospitals and disposal of rubbish. The object was to prevent the spread of infection by isolating victims and removing what was thought to be the cause of the infection.

The Acts required the head of the household, nearest relative, person in charge of the patient or owner/tenant of the building to inform the local Medical Officer of Health of anyone suffering from an infectious disease.

Doctors were also required to submit notifications on an appropriate form. The practitioner was paid 2s 6d for notification of disease in a private patient but only 1s 0d if he was employed by a public body or institution. The system was overseen by the Local Government Board which became the Ministry of Health in 1919.

This system continued until 1974 when the post of Medical Officer of Health was abolished. Notification is now made to a consultant in communicable diseases attached to the local health authority. Further revisions and additions to the list of notifiable diseases have been made over the years the last being in 1988.

#### **LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NOTIFICATION OF DISEASES ACT.**

Minutes of the Stokesley Rural District Sanitary Committee Meeting, 4<sup>th</sup> February, 1893.

Notice is hereby given that at a meeting of the above Authority held after notice had been given to every member thereof in the manner prescribed by the Statutes in that behalf at the Union Offices (Stokesley Workhouse),

Stokesley, the 4<sup>th</sup> Feb. 1893, a Resolution, of which the following is a true copy, was duly passed and entered in the minutes viz;

Mr J H Heavyside moved and Mr Wm Winn seconded and carried that this Authority adopt the Infectious Diseases

(Notification ) Act,1889, and that this resolution be published in the 'Yorkshire Herald' of the 11<sup>th</sup> Feb. instant, and by handbills and notices to be affixed to the principal Doors of every Church and Chapel in the District to which notices are usually affixed, and that this Resolution come into operation on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of March next.

The following is a definition of the diseases to which the Act applies, namely: Small-pox, Cholera, Diphtheria, Membranous Croup, Erysipelas, the disease known as Scarlatina or Scarlet Fever and the fevers known by any of the following names – Typhus, Typhoid, Enteric, Relapsing, Continual or Puerperal.

### Section 3

(1) Where an inmate of any building used for human habitation within a District to which this Act extends is suffering from any Infectious disease to which this Act applies, then, unless such building is a Hospital in which such persons suffering from Infectious Disease are received, the following provisions shall have effect, that is to say:

(a) 'The head of the family to which such inmate (in this Act referred to as the patient) belongs, and in his default the nearest relatives of the patient present in the building or being in attendance on the patient, and in default of such relatives every person in charge of or in attendance on the patient' and in default of any such person the occupier of the building shall, as soon as he becomes aware that the patient is suffering from an Infectious Disease to which this Act applies, send notice thereof to the Medical Officer of Health of the District.'

(b) 'Every Medical Practitioner attending on or called in to visit the patient shall forthwith on becoming aware that the patient is suffering from an Infectious Disease to which this Act applies, send to the Medical Officer of Health for the District a Certificate stating the name of the patient, the situation of the building, and the Infectious Disease from which, in the opinion of such Medical practitioner, the patient is suffering.'

(2) 'Every person required by this Section to give a Notice or Certificate who fails to give the same, shall be liable on summary conviction in manner provided by the Summary Jurisdiction Acts to a fine not exceeding Forty Shillings.'

By Order, George Gibson, Clerk, Stokesley 9<sup>th</sup> February 1893.

### References:

Notification of Infectious Diseases, C H Collins, The Biomedical Scientist,

Stokesley RDC Sanitary Committee Minutes, NYCC County Archives.