THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY FRENCH PUBLIC HEALTH MOVEMENT

In his pioneer article published in 1948 Erwin Ackerknecht surveyed the French hygienic literature from 1815 to 1848 and concluded that the French were the leaders in public health in the early nineteenth century (1). Since that time a number of historians have investigated various aspects of French public health history. But no one has adequately described and analyzed the early nineteenth century French public health movement. The purpose of this paper is to do just that. I shall describe the movement, analyze its leadership, organization and goals, and discuss some of its achievements (2).

The early nineteenth century French public health movement was a movement by a group of physicians, pharmacists-chemists, and administrators to bring about public health reforms in France, primarily in the cities, in order to lower mortality and morbidity rates and to improve the quality of life. The movement clustered around and was propagated by the Paris health council and the society of the Annales d'hygiène publique et de médecine légale. Nearly all the leading hygienists were members of the Paris health council or one of the provincial health councils. Most of the leading hygienists were founders, editors, and/or contributors to the Annales d'hygiène publique, the organ of the public health movement. Many of the leading hygienists were members of the Royal Academy of Medicine, the Royal Academy of Sciences and/or the Academy of Political and Moral Sciences. In these academies and in local medical societies during the early nineteenth century public health issues were debated and public health reforms were urged.

The leading early nineteenth century public hygienists included: in Paris, the physicians Hallé, Villerme, Parent-Duchâtelet, Esquirol, Marc, Kéraudren, Lévy, Guérard, Pariset, Bousquet, Piorry, Mélier; and in the provinces, Fodéré in Strasbourg, Thouvenin in Lille, Marchant in Bordeaux, Pigeotte in Troyes, and Monfalcon, Polinière, and Terme in Lyon. Leading chemists and pharmacists included Labarraque, Pelletier, D'Arcet, Barruel, Chevallier, and Gaultier de Claubry; other leading hygienists were the veterinarians Huzard junior and senior, the statistician Benoist de Chateauneuf, and the administrator Trébuchet.

To set the chronological limits of the movement, the decades from 1820 to 1840 included the most important early nineteenth century public health events and developments: the founding of the Royal Academy of Medicine with public health goals in 1820; the publication of L. R. Villermès’s statistical work in the 1820s; the publication between 1821 and 1836 of all the hygienic works of A. J. B. Parent-Duchâtelet; the founding of the Annales d'hygiène publique in 1829; the cholera epidemic of 1832-35 and the beginning of the reform of the quarantine system; the development by the 1830s of the Paris health council into
the preeminent public health authority in France; and the development of public hygiene as a scientific discipline.

The French public health movement was an indigenous movement. Ideas of public health had been current in France from the last quarter of the eighteenth century, exemplified by the public health goals and activities of the Royal Society of Medicine and the Health Committee of the National Constituent Assembly, as Caroline Hannaway and Dora Weiner have shown (3). By the 1820s the French had a well-established tradition of interest in public health dating back some fifty years.

The French public health movement was quasi-official. With the exception of the Annales d’hygiène publique, the institutions through which the hygienists worked, such as the health councils, national academies, and vaccine commissions were government sponsored. In addition, most hygienists held official positions at the hospitals, in the prison system, on vaccine commissions, at the medical faculties and professional schools. Some of the leading hygienists held administrative posts in the municipal and departmental administrations. Serving on the health councils, holding official posts, participating in the government-sponsored academies, the leading public hygienists were members of the « Establishment ».

The French public health movement was a nationwide movement. Though much of the leadership and organization was Parisian, in major French cities such as Nantes, Lille, Lyon, Bordeaux, Marseille, Troyes, and Strasbourg local hygienists worked for and advocated public health reform. Especially noteworthy was the very active group of Lyonnais physician-hygienists (5).

The French public health movement was interdisciplinary. Though a majority of the leading hygienists were physicians, a sizeable minority were pharamists—chemists, and important contributions were made by veterinarians, architects, engineers, and administrators.

The medical profession played an important role in the French public health movement. The involvement of the medical profession in public health matters dated from the eighteenth century and the Royal Society of Medicine. Although the Royal Society of Medicine did not speak for the medical profession as a whole, it did represent one reformist element of the profession (6). In the early nineteenth century, before the creation of heath councils, local medical societies often served as advisory boards in public health matters. Medical societies within the faculties of medicine advised the national government on public health concerns until the founding of the Royal Academy of Medicine in 1820 (7). The Royal Academy of Medicine was founded with public health goals as the successor to the Royal Society of Medicine. The four permanent commissions of the Academy were public health-related (8). The Royal Academy of Medicine served as a principal forum for discussion and debate and also helped shape national policy on public health matters.

The two leaders of the public health movement and the most influential of the public hygienists were Drs. Villermé and Parent-Duchâtelet. Neither of them ever considered himself the leader of the movement, however. Rather, leadership was always attributed to groups: to the Paris health council and to the society of the Annales d’hygiène publique. These groups provided both the leadership and organization of the public health movement.

Much of the activity of the movement was channeled through the Paris health council, which functioned as an advisory board to the prefect of police, the official in charge of public health for Paris. In the provinces departmental health councils advised the prefects in public health matters. Nearly all the leading public hygienists were members of the Paris health council or one of the provincial health councils (9).
Leading hygienists were founders, editors, and frequent contributors to the *Annales d’hygiène publique*, founded in 1829 as the organ of the public health movement. Hygienists published numerous articles and treatises on all aspects of public health. Most of these works appeared in one form or another in the *Annales*. The *Annales d’hygiène publique* was the main source of publicity for the public health movement and gave the movement its visibility.

French hygienists had both specific administrative and legislative goals. On the local level they advocated administrative reforms such as housing regulations, improvement of sewerage systems and water supplies, and factory regulations. On the national level they urged legislative reforms: a national public health law setting up a nationwide system of health councils and the reform of the quarantine system. Villermé championed a child labor law and a civil registration act. Parent-Duchâtelet urged a national law regulating prostitution. These reforms were closely related to other goals of the public hygienists.

French hygienists wanted to convince the government to accept and implement their definition of public health. They conceived of public health very broadly. Public health was all-encompassing; everything was in its domain. Hygienists wanted to replace the older narrow view of public health, which had been the protection of the nation from imported epidemics with this newer view. If successful, then the quarantine system could be reformed and the government could move into other public health areas which the hygienists considered critical, such as sanitary and social reform.

The Paris health council embodied this newer approach to public health. In order to extend the benefits of this institution hygienists called for a nationwide system of health councils. They also urged that these councils be invested with their own power so that public health would be in the hands of professional experts, the public hygienists, rather than in the hands of elected or appointed officials.

In order to claim professional expertise hygienists had to have professional standing. Therefore one of their principal goals was the establishment of public hygiene as a scientific discipline. Hygienists sought to define and delimit public hygiene as a discipline and to apply what they understood as the scientific method to the study of public hygiene.

By 1848 hygienists had achieved some of their goals and had made important contributions to public health. Their achievements included the transformation of the Paris health council into the leading public health authority in the West by the 1830s; the founding and continued publication of the professional journal the *Annales d’hygiène publique*; the reform of the quarantine system; the passage of a child labor law in 1841; the passage of a law in 1848 establishing a nationwide network of health councils; the establishment of the scientific discipline of public hygiene; major theoretical contributions, and numerous practical sanitary reforms.

Perhaps the two most important contributions of the French public health movement were the development of public hygiene as a scientific discipline and the health council model. The early nineteenth century French public hygienists established the discipline of public hygiene on a « scientific » basis. By scientific, they meant the use of firsthand observation, experimentation, and the numerical method to investigate and solve public health problems. Reflecting the urge of the age to turn every area of social investigation into a « science », the hygienists transformed public hygiene from an « armchair philosophy » into a new science with its foundation in statistics (10). Central to the development of public hygiene as a scientific discipline was the *Annales d’hygiène publique*. In their selection of material the founders and editors of the journal set the limits of public hygiene and demonstrated its appropriate methodology.
The institutional embodiment of the scientific discipline of public hygiene was the health council. By the 1830s the Paris health council had become the model for other health councils both in France and abroad. What was new about the Paris council was not that of an advisory board of health. These had been instituted in times of medical emergency at least as far back as the sixteenth century. When the emergency was over, these boards were disbanded. The Paris health council was a permanent board of technical experts set up to deal with day-to-day problems involving any aspect of the public health. The success of the Paris council led to the establishment in the 1820s and 1830s in a number of French cities of health councils based on the Paris model. The Paris council was also the model used in 1848 when a national law set up a nationwide network of health councils. In addition, the Paris model was copied in the new Belgian nation in the mid-1830s when health councils were established on a nationwide basis and in 1847 when the Kingdom of Sardinia instituted a system of health councils.

In the final analysis, the extent and type of hygienic literature, the numerous activities of the public hygienists, the public health institutions, the professional journal of the movement, the theoretical and practical contributions all attest to French leadership in public health in the decades between 1820 and 1840. In terms of actual public health reforms, both administrative and legislative, significant accomplishments were made. But it seems to me that the greatest contribution of the early nineteenth century French public hygienists was theoretical. They established a new definition of public health for the age and founded the modern discipline of public hygiene.

NOTES

(2) The principal sources for the conclusions I have reached here are the Annales d'hygiène publique, 1829 - 1860, the printed and manuscript reports of the Paris health council and all the provincial health councils, the hygienic writings of major and minor hygienists, published reports and minutes of the relevant academies, archival sources pertaining to public health in the National Archives, Paris, and in the departmental archives where health councils were located, and the municipal archives of Lyon.
(4) Terme and Prunelle were mayors of Lyon; Trébuchet was head of the sanitary office at the Prefecture of Police in Paris.
(5) Terme, Prunelle, Sainte-Marie, Bortex, Monfalcon, Polinier, Pointe.
(6) Hannaway, « The Société Royale de Médecine, »
(7) Such as the Société de l'Ecole de Médecine of the Paris Faculty.
(8) The permanent commissions were : the vaccine commission, the epidemic commission, the mineral water commission, and the secret remedy commission.