

To: All local media  
From: Dickinson-Iron District Health Department

**Note:** Media may contact health department for interviews on this piece specifically or Public Health Week in general at: 906 315-2650.

Date: April 4, 2016  
Re: Op-Ed for Public Health Week

### **Public Health- Celebrating the Past, Preparing for the Future**

by Teresa Frankovich, M.D., M.P.H.

April 4 marks the start of Public Health Week in the United States. If you ask a person on the street, “What does local public health do?” they are likely to say that it provides healthcare for low-income people. But the truth is that public health is actually the only part of the healthcare system that targets *all* people within a community. Because public health’s role is to protect and promote the health of populations through surveillance for infectious diseases; health education; immunizations; ensuring safe well water and septic systems; offering nutrition programs for pregnant women and children; providing reproductive health services; helping to ensure food safety; and myriad other programs-- essentially everyone in a community benefits from public health services in some way.

It is important to remember that although high-tech hospital procedures and expensive medications are valuable tools in treating disease, it is public health that is primarily responsible for improvements in our nation’s health status over the past century. Life expectancy in the United States increased 62 percent between 1900 and 2000, from 47.3 years to 76.8 years, and much of that increase has been attributed to public health achievements. Immunizations, prevention and control of infectious diseases, advances in maternal and infant health, family planning, cancer prevention, occupational and motor vehicle safety, tobacco prevention, air and water quality protection and improvements are just a few of the game-changing contributors to enhanced life expectancy.

The evidence is abundant that prevention is the least expensive and most effective way to secure the health of a population and yet, prevention efforts are traditionally poorly funded. In fact, the U.S. government spends only about 3 percent of its healthcare dollars on public health. If we, as a society, want to continue the gains made in life expectancy and quality of life that have been seen over the last century, we will need to rethink how we invest our limited resources. Is it

better to invest in preventing disease or focus, as we currently do, almost entirely on its treatment?

Here in the U.P we have come to understand that poverty and low educational attainment are two of the biggest predictors of poor health status in our communities, so public health in the future will need to not only continue its traditional services but also work on broader issues that impact population health, such as making health a priority in designing our communities, from healthy housing to parks and playgrounds; promoting access to education; supporting efforts to reduce income inequality; working for social justice; ensuring the safety of food systems while increasing access to healthy food choices; preparing for the effects of climate change; providing access to healthcare for all; and strengthening public health infrastructure-- as advocated by the American Public Health Association.

When public health does its job well, it becomes almost invisible to the public. This week-long celebration of public health is meant to remind all of us about the safeguards that need to be in place and the on-going work being done to keep our communities healthy. So, this week, please take a moment to think about what public health brings to our communities...and what our communities might look like without it.

Irish surgeon Denis Burkitt put it like this, "If people are constantly falling off a cliff, you could place ambulances under the cliff or build a fence on the top of the cliff. We are placing all too many ambulances under the cliff." Your local public health department would argue, "Let's focus on the fences."