PUBLIC HEALTH REFORM
CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

Henry Street Settlement founder Lillian Wald coined the term “public health nurse,” meaning that the nurse treated the whole patient, considering all the factors in a person’s life that could affect his or her health. She aimed to free access to health care from any “denominational [religious] or political difference” and from any dependence on “any doctor, paid or unpaid, who might be treating them.”

Wald was part of a larger reform movement referred to as the Progressive Era. Progressives argued that the poor were not poor due to any moral failing and sought to improve the physical and economic environment that they believed caused poverty. They hoped that poverty could be alleviated by providing access to a range of health care and social services and by passing laws to protect individuals.

Henry Street Settlement’s visiting nurses, who lived in the same neighborhood as their patients, cared for residents who had few if any financial resources. The service would be tiered according to a patient’s ability to pay. Most patients, in fact, did not pay, putting private nursing within reach of the poorest individuals. Wald’s contribution was to put nursing on new terms, “most considerate,” as she put it, “of the dignity and independence of the patients.”

The Settlement and its visiting nurse service flourished in an era of reform. The nursing service quickly expanded beyond the Lower East Side. By 1933, the year Wald retired, Henry Street had employed 265 nurses and had made over 500,000 home visits to 100,000 patients. In 1944, the Visiting Nurse Service of New York became its own entity and Henry Street began to focus predominantly on social work. Although Henry Street Settlement no longer operates a visiting nurse service today, the Settlement’s present-day work is greatly shaped by Lillian Wald’s vision of health.

Wald argued that health care was not just about treating the biological causes of sickness; she believed that the whole person and his or her life circumstances must be considered. She believed that health included the ability to thrive, not just survive. This philosophy is evident in many aspects of Wald’s work—from building playgrounds to investing in arts education.

Many—though not all—of the health care issues that Lillian Wald’s nurse service addressed differ from our chief public health concerns today. In her era, influenza, tuberculosis, and other infectious diseases were rampant. Today, many of those illnesses are less common, but in our society, public health advocates are focused on diabetes, hypertension, and HIV, to name a few. Other issues of Wald’s day, such as maternal mortality and malnutrition, are still concerns in many communities today.
Progressive Era reformers called attention to health concerns in low-income (predominantly immigrant) communities. Whereas their predecessors believed that sickness and poverty were the fault of the individual, Progressive Era reformers sought to improve the physical and economic environment that, they believed, led to disparities in accessing health care and in health itself. They conducted detailed studies and in-depth research, trusting that in research lay solutions.

Many Progressive Era reformers took an active role in promoting access to health care but believed that permanent change must come through laws to protect individuals. Journalists were instrumental in getting the word out to wealthy individuals and policy makers about conditions in low-income neighborhoods, hoping that the government would take more responsibility for alleviating poverty.

One famous Progressive Era photojournalist was a woman named Jessie Tarbox Beals. Another was Jacob Riis, a Danish photojournalist—whose writing was a mix of moralism, close observation, stereotyping, and good intentions. He described the Lower East Side in detail in his 1890 bestseller *How the Other Half Lives*.

1. Individually or in pairs, read the passage on the next page from Jacob Riis’s book *How the Other Half Lives*.

   Through his writing and his photographs, Riis sought to get the attention of New Yorkers with money and political sway. Underline the sections of the passage where Riis is trying to sway the reader to think or feel a particular way. Consider, what is Riis’s point of view, and what is he trying to convey?

2. Share the passages you underlined with the class.

3. Suggested prompts for group discussion:

   **Document analysis:**
   - What do you see in the photo that shows you this is an unhealthy environment?
   - What tactics does Riis use in his photography to elicit an emotional response from the viewer?
   - What tactics does Riis use in his writing to elicit an emotional response from the reader?
   - What do you imagine is Riis’s point of view? How does Riis try to inspire viewers and readers to think about living and working conditions on the Lower East Side?

   **Connecting to your own life:**
   - Is there something you believe is unjust today that you want people to know about? What tactics would you use to get attention for this issue?
   - What type of media would you use to get the word out? Whom would you hope to see your writing or images?
   - Who do you think should be responsible for addressing your issue?
“It is said that nowhere in the world are so many people crowded together on a square mile as here. The average five-story tenement adds a story or two to its stature in Ludlow Street and an extra building on the rear lot, and yet the sign ‘To Let’ is the rarest of all there. Here is one seven stories high. The sanitary policeman whose beat this is will tell you that it contains thirty-six families, but the term has a widely different meaning here and on the avenues. In this house, where a case of small-pox was reported, there were fifty-eight babies and thirty-eight children that were over five years of age...These are samples of the packing of the population that has run up the record here to the rate of three hundred and thirty thousand per square mile. The densest crowding of Old London, I pointed out before, never got beyond a hundred and seventy-five thousand. Even the alley is crowded out...

The homes of the Hebrew quarter are its workshops also...You are made fully aware of it before you have travelled the length of a single block in any of these East Side streets, by the whir of a thousand sewing-machines, worked at high pressure from earliest dawn till mind and muscle give out together. Every member of the family, from the youngest to the oldest, bears a hand, shut in the qualmy rooms, where meals are cooked and clothing washed and dried besides, the livelong day. It is not unusual to find a dozen persons—men, women, and children—at work in a single small room.”

—Jacob Riis, How the Other Half Lives, 1890
Activity #2

How Do We Put People at The Center of Their Health Care?

At a 1904 speaking engagement, Lillian Wald described how her nurses’ philosophy of care stressed empathy and understanding as a path to communication:

“If you go in and make it apparent immediately that you perceive the air to be bad, that you do not approve of all the children lying upon the bed with the sick mother, that you wish to educate and reform, you will not be able to approach the matter of close air, dirt, and disorder without hurt feelings and bad temper. It is remarkable how sensitive and irascible your patient may be under criticism if such an impression is made at first, and how tenderly appreciative the same woman can be if you have first established yourself as having sympathy for her sickness, and understanding of her problem as she sees it.”

Wald advocated for treating the whole person, not just their sickness. She believed that low-income residents should receive top-notch quality care and be treated with “respect and dignity,” regardless of their ability to pay or the conditions of their homes. As Wald spent time on the Lower East Side, she noticed people faced a variety of barriers—such as language barriers, lack of information about resources, and fear of stigma—to accessing help. She knew that if she simply administered nursing services from the Settlement, those most in need would not come. She strategized about how to successfully reach and treat her patients, always keeping the person at the center.

1. Complete the worksheet (included below) and share your responses with the class.


The Visiting Nurse Service of New York Records, Archives & Special Collections, Columbia University Health Sciences Library.
Name: ____________________________

**Directions:** In 1907, a *New York Times* reporter followed a Henry Street visiting nurse on her rounds. Read the report about her day and answer the questions below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Morning</th>
<th>The Afternoon</th>
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<tr>
<td>● The nurse climbs over several boats to reach a pneumonia patient who lives on a canal boat.</td>
<td>● The nurse returns to check in on the pneumonia patient</td>
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<td>● Goes to her next visit. She bathes a newborn baby and its mother, “a poor creature left utterly destitute by her husband’s recent death.”</td>
<td>● Heads off to see a little girl recuperating from an illness. On the way, buys flowers to cheer her “otherwise dreary home.” Once there, she takes time to explain a change in medicine to the girl’s mother.</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Visits an elderly man with leg problems, whose “chief hankering seemed to be for a little intelligent gossip.”</td>
<td>● Returns to see the newborn baby and its mother.</td>
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<td>● Next, sees a “charming old Irish-woman, almost crippled but not a case for a hospital.” With the nurse’s help, the woman is able to manage and maintain a home for herself and her only son.</td>
<td>● Goes back to visit the pneumonia patient.</td>
</tr>
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<td>● Visits a family of Italian immigrants. Although a dying man and his wife cannot “bear to be separated during his last few weeks,” the wife continues to sew garments so she doesn’t lose her job. The nurse makes the man comfortable.</td>
<td>● On the way home, the nurse has “the happy inspiration” of hiring someone to do the sewing for the dying Italian man’s wife. That way, “she might spend all her time with her dying husband and yet not lose her place and be without livelihood when she found herself alone.”</td>
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**Notice how the nurse focuses on the “whole” person—their home, work, family life—not just their sickness. What are three examples of this?**

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   __________________________________________________________________________

2. __________________________________________________________________________
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   __________________________________________________________________________

3. __________________________________________________________________________
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Activity #3

How Do Various Health Issues Intersect?

Wald wrote in her 1915 memoir, *The House on Henry Street*:

“The founders of the Settlement realized that there were large numbers of people who could not, or who sometimes would not, avail themselves of the hospitals; that ninety per cent of the sick people in cities were sick at home...and that a humanitarian civilization demanded that something of the nursing care given to those in hospitals should be accorded to sick people in their homes. Economic reasons were revealed, too, namely that the valuable and expensive hospital space should be saved for those to whom the hospital treatment was necessary; obvious social reasons, also, namely that many people, particularly women, could not leave their homes without the danger of imperiling, or sometimes destroying, the home itself.”

The Henry Street visiting nurses service that Wald had created—to tend to patients in their homes; to assess their conditions, home environments, and support systems; and to teach them how to care for themselves—was part nursing and part social work. It was also an innovative blueprint for what would become the Visiting Nurse Service of New York and a template for home care nursing services that is still in use today.

For Wald, case became cause. Trouble became action. Or as she put it, “From the root of the old gospel another branch has grown, a realization that the call to the nurse is not only for the bedside care of the sick, but to help in seeking out the deeplying basic causes of illness and misery, that in the future there may be less sickness to nurse and to cure.”

Additionally, Wald knew that discrepancies in health were exacerbated by intersecting issues related to income, race, national origin, immigration status, and gender. And thus, the nursing service provided holistic care that considered all of the factors that led to sickness and kept patients from improving.

1. In pairs or individually, complete the worksheet (included below) and share your answers with the class.
Directions: Review the 1933 pamphlet from the Henry Street visiting nurses service and answer the questions below.

1. The nurse comes in...what are the father, mother, five-year-old boy, and three-year-old girl each dealing with?

2. Consider how the Henry Street visiting nurse strategizes to help the whole family: what does she do to help each family member individually in this fictional family of four?

3. Which of the nurse’s activities are not related directly to medical care?

4. Why do you think these other activities are part of the nurse’s job?

Activity #4

Which Public Health Issues Affect Our Communities Today?


1. Conduct research on local health issues today. Below is a worksheet to guide your research.
Name: ____________________________________________________________

**Directions:** Use the following resources (or others that you can locate) to answer the questions below.

NYC Board of Health: https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/index.page
New York Immigration Coalition: https://www.nyic.org/our-work/health/
New York State of Health: https://nystateofhealth.ny.gov/
Apicha: https://www.apicha.org/
NPR health section: https://www.npr.org/sections/health/

1. Generally, what are some of the main health concerns in New York City today?

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________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. Are there certain areas of New York City where people are more likely to face these issues?

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________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

3. Based on your own knowledge and/or additional research, what are some of the main health concerns in your immediate neighborhood?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
4. What are the factors that lead to disparities in health and health care? Which communities are more marginalized in terms of accessing health care?


5. Even when health care services exist in marginalized communities, what are the barriers to accessing care?


6. Locally and nationally, what are some places and public programs that serve low-income people?
2. Suggested prompts for group discussion:

Reflecting on your research:

- What surprised you about your research findings?
- Did you learn about any health issues that you didn’t consider a “health” or “medical” issue before today?
- What are some of the proposed solutions you found?
- Lillian Wald emphasized that health care should consider the whole person. What is a modern-day example of treating health in a holistic way?

Connecting to your own life:

- Are you concerned about a particular health care issue in your immediate community? If not, is there a health-related issue that affects other New Yorkers that you want to learn more about?
- How could you raise awareness about this health issue?
- How would your strategies to raise awareness differ between the affected community and an unaffected community?