

Dr. Charles Hastings' strong personality made Toronto the Canadian leader in Public Health.

By the late 19th Century the booming economy of Toronto, like other cities across the continent, was bringing with it poverty, slums, pollution and ill-health. Sound social welfare policies were needed. Dr. Hastings served as Medical Officer of Health for the City of Toronto from 1910 - 1929 and his passion for such policies is believed to have stemmed from the death of his infant daughter who had been contaminated by a dairy farmer suffering from typhoid fever. While he suffered much criticism for introducing many of his reforms, he was eventually able to convince the City that public health was an investment rather than an expenditure. Under his leadership Toronto became the first city to enforce pasteurization of milk in 1911, one of the first to chlorinate its water and modernize its plumbing and sewer systems, order the full inspection of slaughter houses, require medical examinations of food handlers at grocery stores and restaurants, inspect health hazards in factories, help in the establishment of the public health nursing systems, neighbourhood baby clinics, and medical and dental inspection in public schools. He became President of the Canadian Public Health Association in 1916 and of the American Public Health Association in 1918. In an address to the Canadian Club in 1916, he was able to show evidence of the success of the reforms re disease, and in particular that of diphtheria. Where 107 persons out of 100,000 died of diphtheria in 1910, only 19 per 100,000 died in 1915. He stressed the importance of educating and enlightening the public and the role the press could play in its achievement. He also encouraged speaking out, public speaking, and the wide distribution of informative leaflets and other means of communication to keep the public informed.

Dr. Charles Hastings, Medical Officer of Health for the City of Toronto, in his report of October, 1918 wrote:

“The entire Continent of America has just passed through the most severe epidemic that has ever visited our Nations, and Toronto has had to bear the full share. It is a regrettable fact that after such an enormous sacrifice of human life the medical profession, both on the continent of Europe and America are in more or less of a dilemma as regards the real cause of this outbreak and the best ways and means to adopt for its prevention. As on all similar occasions, there are an almost unlimited number of enthusiasts who are eager to put their ideas before the public. When applied to medical science, this is most unfortunate. The more scientific heads, the careful and deliberate thinkers in the medical world are very conservative in their opinions as regards the cause, prevention, or treatment of this disease.”