

PUBLIC HEALTH

Territory of Hawaii Is Plague Control Frontier

Constant Vigilance of Health Officials and Dogged Fight Against Rats Keeps America Safe from Disease

By M. F. HARALSON, M.D.

Territorial Commissioner of Public Health

ONE of the great scourges of mankind, bubonic plague, made its reappearance in the modern world when a pandemic of the disease was touched off in Hongkong in 1894.

Swiftly the disease spread to many corners of the globe. In December, 1899, it broke out in the Chinese section of Honolulu. In March, 1900, San Francisco reported the first case on continental America. It spread to Oakland, Seattle, Los Angeles and farther inland.

Today plague is still endemic in the United States. It smoulders among rats of the Territory of Hawaii, and among rats, ground squirrels, marmots and prairie dogs of the far western states. Its occurrence among humans in the United States is rare only because of the unflagging vigilance of health authorities in exercising plague control.

Perhaps the most crucial frontier in this effort to conquer plague in the United States exists here in Hawaii. And in no American area did the "black death" flare up so menacingly as it did in the islands at the turn of this century. Within four months of the discovery of the first case in 1899 there were 71 island plague victims. Since 1899 there have been 401 cases of human plague reported to the Board of Health in Hawaii and 363 of these victims died.

But Hawaii health authorities and the United States Public Health Service have worked valiantly and successfully to combat plague here and protect the people of America from this disease, which still has its primary origin in the Orient. The last case of human plague recorded in Hawaii was in December, 1939. Yet a never-ceasing fight is being waged to control the menace that still exists in the plague-infested rat populations of the islands.

That fight is a dogged one, for there is no minimizing the menace of infected rats. The disease is caused by organisms which are conveyed to man by fleas, for which infected rodents serve as hosts.

In the fiscal year ending June 30, 1941, a total of 82 infected rats was found in Hawaii, 80 in the sugar lands of the island of Hawaii and two on the island of Maui. The island of Oahu, where Honolulu is and where United States armed forces are based, has had no plague since 1910.

The Territorial Board of Health's campaign of plague control is prosecuted by a force of 80 workers, concentrated largely in the areas of known infestation on the islands of Hawaii and Maui. Supplemented by allotments from a voluntary shipping tax on Oahu, Maui and Hawaii and by funds from the United States Public Health Service, the Board's plague control budget totals annually about \$150,000. Considerable additional funds are spent by sugar and pineapple plantations in the island war on rats.

The principal field control measure is poisoning with banana-phosphorus bait or thallium sulphate treated barley. Last year 2,500,000 pieces of poison bait were placed, most of it outdoors, for Hawaii's rat population is principally a sylvatic one.

Hundreds of snap traps are set, the rats caught in this manner serving as an index to the total rat population. Rat squads also reduce rodent population by gassing field burrows and shooting rats in tree nests.

The Board of Health operates four plague laboratories in the islands, two on Hawaii, one on Maui and one on Oahu. Here more than 100,000 of the 200,000 rats killed or found dead last year were examined for plague. Hundreds of guinea pigs are inoculated yearly with material from rats and with ground-up fleas, to determine infection.

Much of the work done within urban communities of the Territory is the education of householders in methods of eradication—rat proofing, poisoning and trapping.

The program in Hawaii at present provides an index of the rodent plague problem. Island health forces stand constant, vigilant guard against the threat of human plague. And as an island out-

post between the Orient and continental America, Hawaii's health department will continue to give its utmost effort to protect the people of the islands and of the United States mainland from the scourge of plague.

Science News Letter, November 1, 1941

MEDICINE

Sulfa Drugs and Serum Cut Pneumonia Death Rate

NINE out of 10 persons who once would have died of pneumonia now are saved, thanks to the sulfa drugs and the development of serum for the 32 different types of pneumonia, Dr. Edmund F. Foley, of the University of Illinois College of Medicine, declared.

Slashing the pneumonia death rate from 50% to 5% is "the outstanding medical achievement of the last decade," he said, but warned that even with serums and the sulfa drugs, early treatment for pneumonia is imperative.

Pneumonia, in three-fourths of the cases, begins with the patient "half-sick" with what is thought to be a cold. Several days may pass, days which are valuable for treatment, before the disease is recognized and medical aid sought. In only one-fourth of the cases does pneumonia start explosively with chill, fever, pain, cough and prostration.

Science News Letter, November 1, 1941

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