

# ANNOTATIONS

## PUBLIC HEALTH AND WELFARE. THE CITIZEN'S RESPONSIBILITY<sup>1</sup>

IF, as has been said, every institution is but the lengthened shadow of a single man, Homer Folks' shadow has become something more significant than any institution: It is a body of law, state and local, and an enlightened social consciousness among New York's leading citizens as yet unmatched by any other state. The laws deal with tuberculosis control, child health and welfare, mental health, the care of the aged, control of diphtheria and syphilis, public assistance and other aspects of human need. The social consciousness makes possible bipartisan support for prompt action to meet new problems as they arise.

Folks' first interest was in social welfare. As early as 1909, however, he realized that disease is a primary cause of destitution. Consequently, "keep the parents alive" became the objective of his long crusade for child welfare. In his own terms, "The destination of health is universality: of relief, its disappearance."

When I was State Health Commissioner of New York in the early 1930's, Homer Folks was pleased when I told him that not only two Democratic governors but also leaders in the Republican legislature had said he headed the most powerful pressure group in the State—"The Charity Lobby." Characteristically, he did not interpret this as a personal compliment. To him its significance lay in the fact that substantial citizens, to whose views both the Chief Executive and legislators were constrained to listen, had been persuaded in constantly increasing numbers to support the great cause of human advance.

<sup>1</sup> Zimand, Savel, Editor. PUBLIC HEALTH AND WELFARE, THE CITIZEN'S RESPONSIBILITY—Selected Papers of Homer Folks. New York, The Macmillan Company, 1958.

In 1911 Folks wrote an article on "The Prevention of Insanity" for the *American Review of Reviews* and organized the first State Committee on Mental Hygiene. It was his thesis that if the causes of mental disease are within human control, existing knowledge should be applied, research for new knowledge undertaken and a serious effort made forthwith to control them. (Note the word *forthwith*. Homer Folks was at the opposite end of the spectrum from the timid and the procrastinating.) He identified syphilis, alcohol and toxic infections as obvious physical causes of insanity, dismissing overwork and heredity as direct causes. As we consider the present status of work toward control of mental illness, it would appear that Folks, the Layman, was wiser in his generation than the sons of Hippocrates.

This reviewer agrees with Stanley P. Davies, author of the Foreword, that Folks not only met the challenges of his time but gave the leadership which shaped events. In addition, he anticipated challenges. He had the great capacity of identifying and interpreting them to responsible citizens—laymen as well as physicians and politicians—before the need for action had emerged into public consciousness. This is the technique by which he developed the most adroit and dynamic program which I have seen during the course of a long professional life in statewide health education. It was because of this that he was able for nearly half a century to give intellectual leadership to political leaders.

As edited by his able son-in-law, Savel Zimand, the "Selected Papers of Homer Folks" entitled "Public Health and Welfare, the Citizens' Responsibility" is an excellent and valuable book. Its single flaw—perhaps because of the inherent modesty of the entire clan, inclusive of in-laws—is that the Biographical sketch is just that, doing less than full justice to this great man and his remarkable influence on our age and time.

This book is a must for every member of the APHA. It also should be read by every citizen who gives leadership to any health and welfare program. This is the story of a pioneer. We need the like of Homer Folks for the ventures of today and tomorrow.

THOMAS PARRAN