

Physician accused of neglect in smallpox epidemic

"A sensation developed in the Clear Creek smallpox epidemic today in the filing of an affidavit against Dr. Pressley, the Ellettsville physician, by the county health board for failure to report the epidemic when it started." Bloomington Telephone, Jan. 24, 1908.

The truth of the matter was that there were four new cases of smallpox in Clear Creek, and county officials were more than worried about it. It wasn't a question of designating a scapegoat for the frightening spread of the disease. Finding a cause was certainly necessary.

Readers of the *Telephone* may have wondered why an Ellettsville physician had made a house call in Clear Creek. The reason was explained in the front-page article.

Dr. I.N. Pressley had doctored the L.W. Robertson family in Ellettsville before they moved to Clear Creek. They obviously had confidence in him. In fact, the newspaper described the man was "a veteran physician."

Anyway, Pressley had called at the home of Robertson, who was a Monon Railroad agent. Afterward, either failed to recognize



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

smallpox when he saw it or deliberately neglected to report it to the county health board.

The board's reaction was twofold. First, the county health officer, Dr. Otto Rogers, went down to Clear Creek to have a look at the situation. Upon his return, the affidavit was filed against Pressley.

The *Telephone* explained the consequences. "The affidavit filed today is according to the printed instructions of the state board of health which require all physicians in smallpox epidemics to be punished by law. Failure to immediately report a case to the county health officer is punishable by a fine of from \$10 to \$100."

The newspaper's way of describing the regulation is not entirely clear, but the

readers got the idea, anyway. There is a possibility that Pressley misunderstood. One case of smallpox did not constitute an epidemic. On the other hand, he may have intended to report the case in the Robertson family eventually.

The problem was that if one person in the family had the disease, it was entirely possible that others would come down with it, too. Then there was the inevitability of the Robertson children playing with others.

Sure enough, the *Telephone* of Jan. 28 reported that there were four new cases in Clear Creek. "A son in the Charles Martin family has the dread disease, so the whole family except the father is now down with it. In the family of Samuel Allen the malady has broken out, and three children, two grown sons and a daughter, have developed it."

Actually, the incubation period for smallpox is approximately two weeks. Its early symptoms are fever, aching and extreme fatigue. Those are also the signs of influenza. It is only after three days that the telltale skin eruptions appear. By that time, Pressley couldn't possibly have misdiag-

nosed what ailed the member of the Robertson family.

The *Telephone* spelled out the charge against Pressley. "... through gross negligence or ignorance of the disease, neither of which is excused by law, failed to report the matter to the authorities. . . . The county health board is required by State Secretary Hurty to be very strict in requiring reports on epidemics. Negligence on the part of a physician is never excused by the state secretary, and he requires the local boards to keep them to strict account."

That was all well and good if the offending physician was able to appear before the local board or the circuit court. In Pressley's case that was not possible. Explained the *Telephone*, "The facts only came out a week ago when Dr. Pressley himself developed the awful disease at his Ellettsville home."

The newspaper added an intriguing implication to the story. "That other physicians will be implicated in the investigation by the health officers is not known, but it is understood that this is not an impossibility."

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