HEALTH HAZARD: DISEASES LIKE CHOLERA SPREAD QUICKLY IN NEW YORK TENEMENTS SUCH AS THESE ON ELIZABETH ST. (C. 1912), PROMPTING ELIZABETH MILBANK ANDERSON TO TAKE ACTION.

by Francine Russo

In the late 1800s, New York City was awash in deadly microbes. Cholera, typhus, smallpox, diphtheria, and tuberculosis all thrived in crowded immigrant tenements and threatened the entire citizenry. Children were especially vulnerable. In 1886, Elizabeth Milbank Anderson, a mother of two, watched helplessly as diphtheria stole the life’s breath from her 7-year-old son, Jeremiah. That loss and the plight of the city’s poor spurred her to action. For the next 35 years, she worked tirelessly and imaginatively to elevate public health in her home city, leaving a legacy of improved sanitation and health education, as well as a foundation to continue her work.
NOW FITTING THEN THAT A NEW GIFT to the Mailman School’s Center for the History and Ethics of Public Health was made in honor of a woman who did so much to change local public health history and address health inequities. The gift of about $250,000 establishes the Elizabeth Milbank Anderson Fellowship Fund for doctoral students and supports a faculty position at the Center. It comes from Anderson’s great-great-grandson, Bob Harvey, MPH ’07, a Mailman School graduate.

Harvey continues his illustrious forbearer’s work in his role as a director of the Milbank Memorial Fund, a public health foundation. Anderson established the foundation in 1905 in memory of her mother and father, a successful industrialist. “She was a visionary in many respects,” says Harvey, who is writing a book about his great-great-grandmother.

Anderson funded one of the first tuberculosis laboratories in the United States at what is today the Trudeau Institute in Saranac Lake, N.Y. She also underwrote public school lunch programs, school-based medical inspections, public “comfort stations” (bathrooms), laundries and bathhouses for people without running water or sanitation, and grocery stores that sold fresh and wholesome foods at cost in poor neighborhoods. Her work on behalf of women and minorities included serving as the largest benefactor of Barnard College of her day and establishing and funding the Harlem office of the Legal Aid Society.

Though Harvey never knew Anderson, who died in 1921, as a young child he did know her daughter, Eleanor Campbell, a woman remarkable in her own right. A physician at a time when it was difficult for women to become doctors, Campbell founded and directed the Judson Health Center, which served many thousands of the poor in downtown Manhattan. Harvey’s mother, Elizabeth Ashforth Harvey, also worked as a director at Judson.

Speaking of the new fellowship fund, Harvey notes, “I believe that my forebears would approve of the way the Center for the History and Ethics of Public Health works, because they had a strong sense of social justice.”

Like Harvey’s illustrious ancestors, the Center for the History and Ethics of Public Health is itself a trailblazer. Barely a decade old, the Center is unique in combining the study of history with ethics in public health. Earlier this year, it was designated by the World Health Organization as a WHO Collaborating Center for Bioethics, one of only six globally and the only one devoted to the ethics of public health. The Center is working with WHO on the ethics of disease surveillance, vaccination, and screening for tuberculosis. The Center also seeks to shape public policy through its work with state and city governments as well as the Institute of Medicine and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It’s hard to overestimate the importance of Harvey’s gift, says historian David Rosner, PhD, MPH, who co-directs the Center with ethicist Ronald Bayer, PhD, his fellow professor of Sociomedical Sciences. The gift not only has jump-started the Center’s endowment campaign, but even more importantly, has given it a platform for receiving matching funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities. (Because the Center’s faculty members work in the humanities, they are only rarely eligible for grants from the National Institutes of Health, which support research in the sciences.) In 2009, the Center won an NEH challenge grant, a first for a school of public health. The NEH will provide a 1-to-3 grant of $725,000 if the Mailman School raises $2,175,000 by July 31, 2014. The School is closing in on that goal.
Every day, the Center’s faculty and students examine ethical issues from centuries past as well as those ripped from the headlines. Some ongoing work focuses on today’s tensions between patient privacy and the imperatives of public health. Many health issues are rife with ethical concerns, says Bayer, whose own work centers on ethical challenges around HIV/AIDS. “They affect how we do surveillance on diseases like TB, measles, and cancer, raising questions about privacy and consent,” he says. “These questions are at the heart of public health.”

Hot controversies are the bread and butter of the Center’s faculty, but they are examined within a historical framework. Rosner, who is the Ronald H. Lauterstein Professor of Sociomedical Sciences, is studying the history of how children were exposed to lead paint. When did the paint industry know that lead was harmful? When did it stop using lead? Rosner’s expertise has informed current lead abatement litigation. James Colgrove, PhD, MPH, a professor of Sociomedical Sciences who has written a book on battles over vaccines for children, tackles such thorny questions as how we track who gets vaccinated and whether children who aren’t immunized can be barred from schools. Not easy questions, and far from settled.

Harvey understands the value of the Center’s unique mission. “I hope,” he says, “that the fund attracts students who share the vision that ethical inquiries into historical developments can inform our understanding of the past and our ability to design effective solutions.”

The Elizabeth Milbank Anderson Fellowship Fund will provide funds for tuition and stipends to support high-caliber doctoral students like those now investigating a range of compelling areas at the Center. One student, for example, is delving into the use of conscientious objectors as research subjects during World War II. Another is exploring the controversy over evidence to support the recommendation that Americans limit salt in their diets, whether or not they suffer from hypertension.

Mailman School Dean Linda P. Fried sees a nice symmetry in the Milbank gift. “It is rooted both in Bob’s great-great-grandmother’s visionary work in the past and his own vision for the future,” she says. “He understands at a deep level that what we have learned from the history of public health must be foundational to its future.”

For Harvey’s part, he sees many of the same ethical concerns at play today as in his great-great-grandmother’s time. He may not have fully understood everything he heard as a child at his family’s dinner table, but one thing, he says, was abundantly clear: “Lots of people had problems getting access to health care, and that’s still true.”

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