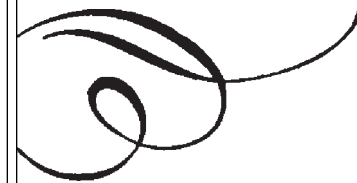


UNDERSTANDING THE “SEXUAL PLAGUES”: EVIDENCE FOR CORRECTING CATALOG RECORDS FOR AN INDIANA STATE GOVERNMENT PUBLICATION

by Jennifer Burek Pierce



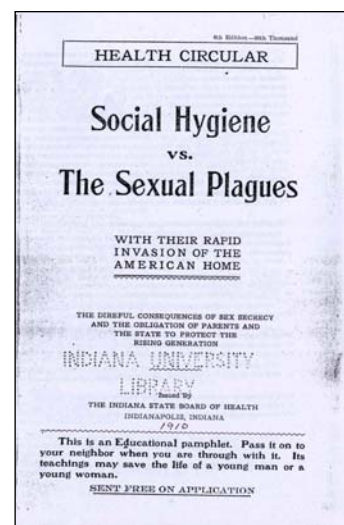
When Indiana’s State Board of Health began distributing “Social Hygiene Versus the Sexual Plagues,” an early twentieth-century sex education pamphlet intended to keep young men from risking sexually transmitted infection, this pamphlet positioned Indiana at the vanguard of a growing public health movement. “Social Hygiene Versus the Sexual Plagues” warned against both the “rapid invasion of the American home” by incurable ailments like syphilis and “the direful consequences of sex secrecy” (Indiana State Board of Health, 1909). Although these cautions may sound hyperbolic, or even simply strange, to our ears, the matter of providing sex education to unmarried individuals was deeply controversial. It took considerable effort to publish this title, which is still found in a number of Indiana libraries. The hidden story of the creation of this state government publication provides new information about its authorship and publication dates, which are often inaccurate in catalog records for this title.

John N. Hurty, who was State Health Commissioner of the Indiana State Board of Health from 1896 until 1922, was a pivotal figure in seeing “Social Hygiene Versus the Sexual Plagues” printed and disseminated. Hurty is known for his pioneering public health efforts, which include an 1899 state law that served as the basis for the 1906 federal Pure Food and Drug Act (Indiana State Department of Health, n.d.; Indiana Department of Environmental Management, 2006). His concerns were both bold and broad, resulting in professional activity in chemistry, public health, and dentistry (Bennett & Feldman, 2000; Christen, Jay, & Christen, 2000). Also a noted advocate for health in the public schools, Hurty followed the work of and interacted with a number of prominent health researchers and reformers. He was a proponent of eugenics and worked ardently in hopes of, as he saw it, eliminating preventable threats to healthy living (Hurty, 1932). His association with Prince A. Morrow, a doctor practicing in New York, led to his interest in preventing sexually transmitted infection as a dimension of this activity (Burek Pierce, 2006).

Hurty used his state government position to persuade other prominent citizens to form the Indiana Society for Social Hygiene. It was this organization, according to Hurty’s official correspondence, that was largely responsible for writing and disseminating “Social Hygiene Versus the Sexual Plagues.” The Society’s activities began in 1907 and continued for some years after, concentrating on disseminating sexual and reproductive health information via the pamphlet and a hired speaker (Burek Pierce, 2006).

This pamphlet, then regarded as radical and controversial, would not strike a present-day reader as particularly inflammatory – or, at least not in the same sense that Hurty’s contemporaries did, when to acknowledge sexually transmitted infection at all was a particularly outrageous defiance of social norms. Its contents are a pastiche of health information, moral commentary, and literary selections. “Social Hygiene Versus the Sexual Plagues” presented health statistics that showed the pervasiveness of sexually transmitted infection and insisted that facts must replace superstition and fear. Dramatically phrased rhetorical questions recur, as when readers are asked, “Since a young man must learn of his sex nature SOME TIME, which is the better for him – the wholesome and noble truths of science and morality, or the misleading, degrading street or “curb-stone” information that today often constitutes his sole knowledge?” (Indiana State Board of Health, 1909, p. 4).

This pamphlet, retained as both a government document and an example of early twentieth-century sex education efforts, went through at least four printings.



Primary and secondary sources indicate that the first four printings occurred before 1910, the date most commonly given for the publication in catalog records. Hurty's first biographer argues for a 1908 date of publication (Rice, 1946), which is a full two years earlier than the date which most libraries' records associate with this title. Hurty's official correspondence gives the date for the fourth and most commonly held edition of "Social Hygiene Versus the Sexual Plagues" as 1909 (Burek Pierce, 2006). There is no evidence to support a publication date of 1930, the latest date assigned to the pamphlet in one Indiana library's records.

Thus, information gleaned provides new perspective on the composition and dating of this historic Indiana state government publication. Rather than sole authorship by a government agency, the pamphlet is actually the product of a public-private partnership. Further, it is likely that all editions of "Social Hygiene Versus the Sexual Plagues" were printed before 1910. First or second issues should be assigned the date of publication as 1908, and later editions should be dated to 1909. These corrections would support researchers' ability to gain an accurate understanding of Indiana's involvement with national and international health reform work of the early twentieth century.

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