

New York, the Nation, the World

The Career of Surgeon
General Thomas J. Parran, Jr.,
MD, (1892–1968)

LYNNE PAGE SNYDER, PHD

Thomas J. Parran, Jr., the sixth Surgeon General (1936–48) of the United States Public Health Service (PHS), remains among the most influential figures in 20th century public health in the United States.

A brilliant administrator, he worked during an era of unprecedented cooperation between Congress and the Executive Branch to expand Federal involvement in public health. Parran promoted a vision of regionally organized health services, rooted in clinical medical research, with government playing an active role. He is best remembered for leading a national campaign to eradicate syphilis.

Parran was born on September 28, 1892, and raised near St. Leonard's, Maryland, on his family's tobacco farm. He attended St. John's College in Annapolis on a scholarship, was graduated from Georgetown University with a degree in medicine in 1915, and served his internship at Sibley Memorial Hospital in Washington, DC.

His lifelong interest in research was sparked during two summers' work under Dr. Joseph J. Kinyoun, first director of the PHS Hygienic Laboratory, forerunner of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). But Parran was to remain, in his words, "a frustrated researcher." Kinyoun recruited Parran to join a PHS field team of young physicians under Dr.



**A young Dr. Thomas J. Parran, Jr.,
around the time of World War I.**

Leslie L. Lumsden building privies and surveying conditions in the South. In March 1917, Parran reported to Okmulgee, Oklahoma, for the first of many assignments in rural sanitation.

After he qualified for a Regular PHS Commission in September 1917, Parran continued working in rural health services administration, sanitation, and the control of communicable diseases. He served a year near Fort Oglethorpe in Chattanooga, Tennessee, then was assigned to the Muscle Shoals Nitrate Plant near Florence, Alabama. Subsequent assignments to the Tri-State Sanitary District (headquartered in Missouri) and a host of health departments in the Middle West and South taught him, Parran would later recall, about the value of county health departments and how outside experts could leverage local decision making.

Between field assignments, Parran tasted life in Washington DC. During the summer of 1919 he held a desk job, rating disabilities for the Bureau of War Risk Insurance, which would separate from PHS in 1922 to become the new Veterans' Bureau. In October

1923, Parran joined a group of young medical officers who took six months of public health courses at the Hygienic Laboratory, receiving the practical equivalent of a Master's Degree in Public Health.

To Parran, World War I demonstrated how Federal dollars and legislation could boost the effectiveness of public health departments. Sanitation activities near military areas spurred State governments to hire full-time professional public health workers. And the Chamberlain-Kahn Act of 1918 crowned a successful wartime campaign to control venereal diseases, funding new programs, including a Division of Venereal Diseases within PHS.

Parran's first leadership position was as Director of the Division. When he was appointed chief in September 1926, appropriations for the 1918 Act had dwindled considerably. Parran worked to sway public sentiment away from moral condemnation of venereal diseases and toward consideration of syphilis as a medical condition and threat to public health. He took his inspiration from a League of Nations-sponsored study tour to Denmark he had taken in 1925.

Practically speaking, Parran advocated the strengthening of health departments and the sponsorship of clinical medical research, two themes that would define his career. In 1927, he hosted a meeting of health department workers where informal agreement was made to treat venereal diseases. The following year, Parran helped found the Committee on Research in Syphilis (1928), and its successor, the Cooperative Clinical Group (1929). The Group sponsored comparative studies of syphilis treatments and provided a scientific basis for promoting the use of salvarsan. PHS provided partial funding of the Group's studies and published the findings in a journal called "Venereal Disease Information."

Parran's talents in rural health administration would soon lead him temporarily in a new direction. A reform-minded Gov. Franklin D. Roosevelt requested that Parran be lent to the State of New York. In April 1930, Parran took up his post as State Health Commissioner.

His primary task was to head a commission on the reorganization of public health services. In 1931, the Special Health Commission released its recommendations, published as "Public Health in New York State, 1932." They revolved about the creation of county health departments to replace a messy patchwork of health boards ill-equipped to handle an expanded set of Depression-era services.

Although few of the Commission's recommendations were enacted, Parran's work on the issue of syphilis achieved more success. The Columbia Broadcasting System inadvertently launched Parran's campaign in 1934 after executives censored the phrase "syphilis control" from a talk he was preparing to deliver on the air, leading Parran to cancel his appearance. Newspapers across the nation reprinted the censored speech. At New York City Mayor La Guardia's suggestion, Parran led a fact-finding tour to England and Scandinavia in 1935, and in October of that year, New York City's Department of Health established a Bureau of Social Hygiene.

Parran became active in New Deal politics both in New York and nationally. In 1934, newly-elected President Roosevelt appointed Parran to the Committee on Economic Security, the group that drafted what would become the Social Security Act of 1935. Parran joined the Committee's Science Advisory Board as a member of a subcommittee on medical research. Expanding on Parran's approach to public health, the group drafted Title 6 of the Act that authorized \$8 million for public health

departments and \$2 million for scientific research into disease.

President Roosevelt named Parran Surgeon General in the spring of 1936 to succeed Hugh Cumming. Parran was sworn in on April 6, 1936.

Parran's syphilis control campaign was in full swing by the fall of 1936. According to historian Allan Brandt, Parran's "scientific, bureaucratic" approach to syphilis control consisted of (a) free diagnostic centers, aided by the advent of a simplified Wasserman test; (b) prompt therapy; (c) case-finding of contacts; (d) mandatory premarital blood tests; and (e) public education, including the highly-acclaimed book he published in 1937, "Shadow on the Land."

Title 6 funds supported drives to identify and treat syphilis, and Parran called a series of national conferences for public health officers. Passage of the National Venereal Disease Control Act of 1938 made funds available for new rapid treatment centers that employed the new sulfa drugs, and later, penicillin, to replace arsenicals.

It was also under Parran's leadership that his close associate and collaborator, Dr. Raymond Vonderlehr, transformed a syphilis control demonstration project in Macon County, Alabama, into an open-ended survey of the disease's effects that intentionally deceived its subjects. The project came to be known as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study.

At the same time Parran and Vonderlehr published a critique of the slack wartime mobilization against syphilis called, "Plain Words About Venereal Disease," Division of Venereal Disease policy actively prevented public health officials from treating the men enrolled in the Tuskegee Study. The shameful and tragic circumstances surrounding the Study would continue until its termination in 1972.

Although Parran is commonly associated with his influential campaign against syphilis, he left his most

indelible mark on the administration and scope of PHS. Parran and Dr. Lewis R. Thompson worked skillfully with Congress and, beginning in the 1940s, with philanthropists Albert and Mary Lasker, to expand a Federal presence in public health. PHS became part of the New Deal, joining the new Federal Security Agency (FSA) in 1939. Parran also served as mentor to a generation of Commissioned Corps physicians whom he encouraged to create new institutions and programs.

The entrance of the United States into World War II in 1941 spurred new projects and laid foundations for postwar expansion of public health. The Community Facilities Act of 1941 enrolled PHS officials in regional planning and construction. Extra-cantonment sanitation in the South was expanded into the Malaria Control in War Areas project (1942), the basis for a new Communicable Disease Center in 1946. Record levels of Federal support, through annual Emergency Health and Sanitation appropriations (1941-44), made possible mass campaigns to screen for tuberculosis and to identify and treat the victims of syphilis.

During the war, Surgeon General Parran made PHS the primary Federal health agency. The National Institute of Health was turned toward military projects, especially in the areas of industrial toxicology and vaccines for typhus, yellow fever, and Rocky Mountain spotted fever.

Inter-agency efforts placed PHS officials in leadership positions. PHS officers were assigned as liaisons to dozens of Federal programs involved in the war effort. PHS entered the arena of labor policy through participation on the War Manpower Commission and administered the Nurse Training Act of 1943 that created the Cadet Nurse Corps, providing Federal funds for health professions education.

To accommodate the significant

expansion and current organization of duties, Parran and Thompson set out to rewrite the statutes underlying PHS operations. Their efforts became the Public Health Service Acts of 1943 and 1944. The agency's new four-bureau structure would remain in place until 1967.

Wartime also allowed Parran and Thompson to promote clinical medical research. Under pressure from Congress, the duo had drafted what became the National Cancer Act of 1937, with generous provisions on which to base future research authorities. With these authorities written into the 1944 Act, Parran and Thompson deftly arranged for the transfer of wartime research contracts from the Office of Scientific Research and Development, creating an extramural grants program for NIH. Parran also laid the groundwork for the creation of new NIH institutes, including the National Institute for Mental Health.

Parran's stature as Surgeon General and his vision of public health coordinated regionally propelled him into leadership of international health affairs during the 1940s. His involvement had started during the 1930s with the Board of Scientific Directors of the Rockefeller Foundation's International Health Division and the Pan American Health Organization.

In 1943, he began work in the State Department's Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation Operations, subsequently affiliated with the new United Nations (UN). When plans were laid in 1945 and 1946 to formalize a new World Health Organization (WHO), it was Parran, working from the plans of Assistant Surgeon General Dr. Louis L. Williams, Jr., who engineered the adoption of a decentralized, regional organizational structure based loosely on the model of PHS's District or Regional Offices. Parran chaired the International Health Conference where WHO's draft constitution was adopted (1946)

and led the U.S. delegations to the WHO Interim Committee and the First World Health Assembly (1948).

President Harry Truman's decision to appoint Assistant Surgeon General Dr. Leonard Scheele instead of renaming Parran in the spring of 1948 may have been an outcome of public disputes over the issue of national health insurance and Parran's difference of approach from that of his more outspoken chief, FSA Administrator Oscar R. Ewing.

National health insurance was a hotly debated issue that pit the American Medical Association (AMA) against many public health officials. Parran was an early and vigorous advocate of government plans to insure general medical care. But he shielded his agency from direct conflict with the AMA by tempering public advocacy for insurance with a focus on creating a regionally-organized health services infrastructure or federally-supported "system," particularly in rural areas, to be set in place before adding the Federal money that would fuel consumer demand. The Hospital Survey and Construction Act of 1946 (Hill-Burton) was a signal step in this direction. Even for his early support of President Truman's proposed national program in 1945, Parran would be attacked by AMA editorialist Morris Fishbein and become the subject of an investigation by the Republican-controlled Congress in 1947.

On October 1, 1948, Parran retired from PHS to begin a career in academic administration. He served as the first dean of a new school of public health at the University of Pittsburgh, endowed by the Mellon family, the heirs of Parran's former chief, Secretary of the Treasury Andrew W. Mellon.

Parran made Pittsburgh a proving ground for ideas developed during his tenure at PHS. He recruited the school's first generation of senior faculty members and brought with him

his Deputy Surgeon General and veteran international health administrator, Dr. James A. Crabtree, who succeeded him as Dean in 1958. He facilitated the integration of area institutions into a medical center, including teaching hospitals and the Western State Psychiatric Institute.

Parran sustained his prominence in international health beyond his tenure as Surgeon General. During the Korean War, he sat on the Rockefeller International Development Advisory Board, as an advisor to the Point Four technical assistance program and helped found the Population Council in 1953. He led a number of fact-finding missions for PHS and WHO, including tours to the Far East (1948), Sub-Saharan Africa (1952), Japan (1956), the Soviet Union (1957), and Liberia (1962).

On his retirement from the University of Pittsburgh in July 1958, Parran assumed the presidency of the Avalon Foundation, affiliated with the Mellon family, and became more active in the A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, where he had been a trustee since 1955. At Avalon, first as president (1958-1961) and later as a trustee and consultant, Parran was involved in grantsmaking in higher education, science, and the arts and remained active as an advisor in the area of health policy.

He continued his work in philanthropy and public health until his death on February 16, 1968, at the Presbyterian University hospital in Pittsburgh. A true statesman of the New Deal, Dr. Parran transformed PHS in the 20th century, bringing to syphilis and other diseases his deeply-held belief in the powers of science and administrative reform to advance public health.

Dr. Snyder is Staff Historian at the Office of PHS Historian.

Tearsheet requests to Dr. Snyder.