

## Weekly Writing Assignment #10: Public Health and Individual Rights

-- Due in Section, week of 11/15 - 11/17 --

Two of the readings this week grapple with the same question: what measures should be taken to control the spread of infectious disease? How do you weigh public health and individual rights to make appropriate decisions? This issue has come up before, in the inoculation debates in 1721. It became a more serious problem in the late 19th and early 20th century as microbiologists quickly realized that many diseases (cholera, tuberculosis, typhoid, diphtheria, etc.) were caused by contagious bacteria. Both the "Discussion on the Advisability of the Registration of Tuberculosis" and Leavitt's "Typhoid Mary" discuss what powers health officials should have over the lives and rights of individuals. These debates recurred repeatedly throughout the 20th century: can states require children to receive immunizations? Must couples be tested for syphilis before receiving a marriage license? Can patients with tuberculosis be confined to hospitals to receive antibiotics? (the answer to all of these questions is yes). They are again emerging as active policy questions: if avian flu emerges, will individuals be hospitalized involuntarily, can cities be quarantined? etc. Many of the most contentious recent debates related to HIV/AIDS. We will discuss HIV in several weeks, but for the time being use your imagination...

The year is 1983. America (and soon the rest of the world) is in the throes of a new epidemic. Over the past few years a series of people from specific risk groups (homosexuals, hemophiliacs, heroin addicts, and Haitians) have developed a new disease, AIDS, characterized by severe immunodeficiency and opportunistic infections. A new virus, lymphadenopathy virus, has been identified that might be the cause of AIDS; but no test yet exists to detect the virus in infected patients. Even though AIDS can be rapidly progressive, some patients can live for years after showing the first signs of the disease. This creates a dilemma for public health officials. Several people known to have AIDS, notably Gaetan Dugas, a male flight attendant from Montreal, continue to engage in high risk behavior (in his case, unprotected sex with multiple male partners). Should public health authorities have the right to confine these people, as was done with Mary Mallon, to keep them from spreading the disease? Should all patients with AIDS be reported to health officials, as has been done with tuberculosis and syphilis, do that their behavior can be monitored?

One official at the CDC is interested in history and asks you to look at some of the historical precedents to help the CDC make its decision. "What can we learn from the debates about reporting TB and from the case of Typhoid Mary? Things

are crazy here at the CDC, so keep your answer short (200 words).” There are no right or wrong answers. When you mention specific material from the texts or use quotations, provide adequate citations (author, page number).