

## Arlington's Asclepius

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Health is a major factor in the functioning of a community on a personal and global scale. Having good doctors and medical practices is something that we can take for granted but it has always been one of the most important factors in the creation and betterment of a community. In communities all over the world, this has been represented in different ways. Many ancient cultures had deities associated with medicine, such as the Greek god of medicine Asclepius (Encyclopædia Britannica), and now, in modern times, a person can win a Nobel Prize in medicine ("Nomination"). Dr. Peyton M. Chichester made a significant contribution to the creation and betterment of Arlington during his work as the director of Arlington's Department of Health from 1924 to 1937 through the systems and practices he implemented in Arlington County. His work helped treat and prevent the spread of diseases in Arlington County and made it a safer and healthier place.

Dr. Peyton Chichester helped bring Arlington County its water sewage system in 1927 (Annette, "Virtual Exhibit: Crepe"; Annette, "Virtual Exhibit: Arlington"). Water and sewer systems are some of the most important things to a healthy community. The average person can only survive without water for about three days (Johnson) and there are many diseases caused by things carried in unclean water. Unclean water can carry parasites such as Giardia and Cryptosporidium, bacteria such as Legionella, Shigella, Salmonella, and E. coli, and viruses such as Norovirus and hepatitis A ("Water-Related Diseases"). There have been seven pandemics in world history of the water borne infection cholera that spreads through water containing the bacteria Vibrio cholerae ("Cholera"). By helping Arlington County get a water system, Dr. Chichester helped greatly decrease the risk of people in Arlington County contracting diseases such as this. Proper sewer systems are also crucial to the health of a community. Diseases can spread through water contaminated with sewage and improper sewage disposal can greatly harm any environment (International Environmental Technology). Dr. Chichester's work with the creation of the water and sewer systems in Arlington County helped to greatly decrease the spread of diseases and further the development of the community.

When Dr. Chichester became the director of Arlington County's Department of Health in 1924, Arlington County was plagued by diphtheria. "Diphtheria toxin-antitoxin was just coming out. But Arlington county pupils lost 8,000 school days because of diphtheria in 1926" (Alexander, p. A-21) states a personality profile of Dr. Chichester in the Richmond Times-Dispatch. After seeing the state of Arlington County, Dr. Chichester proceeded to launch a campaign against diphtheria. He founded a program to have babies brought to Arlington's clinic to be vaccinated against diphtheria at the age of one, and even created a slogan promising "No diphtheria after 1927" which he had put on buttons he gave to the children after their shots (Alexander, p. A-21). His campaign was widely successful in almost completely eliminating diphtheria in Arlington County, and there were no cases recorded for eighteen months after the beginning of 1927 (Alexander, p. A-21). After his success against diphtheria, Dr. Chichester turned his attention to typhoid, smallpox, and animal rabies, and succeeded in almost completely eradicating them in other areas (Alexander, p. A-21). By greatly decreasing the number of cases

of these diseases, Dr. Chichester helped the life expectancy in Arlington County increase and made it a safer and healthier place to live.

Dr. Chichester not only helped treat diseases, but he also focused heavily on preventative medicine, saying in an interview that he “felt the need from the medical standpoint was in preventive medicine” (Alexander, p. A-21). He helped guard Arlington County against many diseases by spreading knowledge, immunizing children against diseases, and taking early action as certain diseases became more rampant. He issued warnings against scarlet fever (“Warning Is”, 1930, p.B-1) and typhus (“Health Officer”, p.A-10) which helped their stay in Arlington County be shorter and less disruptive in the community. He also helped Arlington County through the measles epidemic in 1934 (“Arlington Measles”, p.A-4). His work to prevent diphtheria and other diseases helped Arlington County progress and expand in its starting years.

Dr. Chichester’s call to preventative medicine came in the form of one of his patients - a three-year old girl who he couldn’t save from pneumonia. Her parents had ignored the severity of the whooping cough she had had earlier and called him too late. This experience forever changed Dr. Chichester and “he decided then that only in public health - where he could teach people to prevent death dealing diseases as pneumonia was in those days - could he continue in medicine” (Annette, “Virtual Exhibit: Arlington”). From then on, he focused most of his energy on preventative and pediatric medicine and “helping children start their lives healthy so they could live longer healthier lives” (Annette, “Virtual Exhibit: Arlington”). He created a movement to vaccinate children against harmful diseases which is still in practice in Arlington County today. He advocated for children’s health and educated people on the dangers of certain diseases, helping Arlington County’s children live longer and go on to be more successful and raise healthier children.

Dr. Chichester’s focus on preventative medicine also led him to create and manage many programs and campaigns to educate people on the facts and fictions of medicine. He increased and administered immunizations against diseases such as diphtheria and smallpox (Alexander, p. A-21), which drastically lessened their assault on Arlington County. He informed people about the dangers of “blood sucking insects” (“Health Officer”, p.A-10) such as “ticks, mites, fleas, biting flies, bedbugs” (“Health Officer”, p.A-10) posed through the anti-fly campaigns he managed, which helped to decrease the impact typhoid had on Arlington County. He also worked with the school dentist, Dr. C. R. Boyland, in 1929 to create and conduct “an educational campaign that is directed toward every mother in the county and which, it is proposed, will definitely impress upon them the necessity for early and frequent visits to the school dentist by their children” (Inskeep, p.7). This helped the children of Arlington County be in better health for the rest of their lives and avoid health issues that could distract them from the things they would go on to do that helped Arlington County.

Because of his dedication to his work and the betterment of Arlington County during his time as the director of Arlington County’s Health Department, Dr. Chichester became a well-known and well-liked public figure. He presided over the opening of the Arlington Health Center in 1929 which helped many people in Arlington County (“Health Authorities Active”, p.10), and Arlington County’s Health Department won the highest rating in Virginia in 1929 while he was its director (Inskeep, p.7). When he retired in 1967 after nearly 40 years of service to public

health, the longest service of any public health doctor in Virginia, he had gained a reputation as “a beloved figure in Arlington” (Annette, “Virtual Exhibit: Crepe”) and a book published in 1929 even went as far as to state that:

In medical circles of Arlington County few names are better or more favorably known than that of Dr. Peyton Moncure Chichester ... He is a man of developed talents, broad experience in his specialty and great industry, and the health and sanitation of the county are in good and capable hands. During his administration of the affairs of the office he has introduced a number of innovations that have contributed materially to the safety of the people, as a result he has won and held general public confidence and esteem. (Bruce, p.189)

He was beloved by both adults and children for his work and “achieved considerable local fans for his method of giving children inoculations so they hardly felt them” (Alexander, p. A-21). His work making Arlington County a better and healthier place came from a place of genuine love for his community and that shows in how his work impacted Arlington County and still does today.

The level of safety and health that is guaranteed today in Arlington County, which we sometimes take for granted, allows us to focus on making other improvements. The practices he brought and implemented in Arlington County helped its community live longer, more happy lives where they didn’t have to worry about their health as much as the previous generation. His work paved the way for future generations of doctors and public health officials in Arlington County to make strides in medicine and patient care. The work of Dr. Chichester as the director of Arlington County’s Health Department helped Arlington County become the place it is today.

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