

Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

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The Outrageous 80's

Coldwater, MI. Following the creation of Microsoft and Apple, the 1980's signaled the start of the computer age. It was a time when women wore padded shoulders and big hair. Girls swooned over Tom Cruise and guys played space invaders and Pac Man. The nation saw the collapse of communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In the world of public health, the 80's saw the eradication of smallpox. It also saw the introduction of AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome - another deadly communicable disease) to the United States and to the three counties. AIDS, caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), affects a person's ability to fight infections and leads to premature death. With the advent of AIDS, much attention was placed on lifestyle and prevention. At the same time, the connection between other lifestyles, (i.e. smoking, dietary consumption and activity) and the development of chronic diseases was also becoming more widely known. The district health department worked to address both. The health department took the lead within the community to provide AIDS education, offering a pre-marital education program and blood-borne pathogen trainings. It established Sexually Transmitted Disease clinics and AIDS/HIV Testing and counseling services. It also initiated 'Well Aware', a worksite wellness program that provided blood pressure and cholesterol screenings, health risk assessments and education to employees at the worksite.

Maureen Petzko, now Director of Operations, hired in at the health department in 1980. She recalls the concerns that surfaced when AIDS/HIV first came on the scene and the challenges that quickly ensued. "I can remember no one knew a lot about AIDS at first, except it was deadly, that it was transmitted sexually and through blood and there was lots of misinformation." She went on "When the mandate came down for premarital education classes, a requirement that persons applying for a marriage

license must certify that they had attended an educational session on the transmission and prevention of HIV and sexually transmitted diseases, everyone had questions. Who should teach the classes? Where should the classes be taught? How to certify class attendance? How to fund the new program? The local health department had to figure it out quickly.”

Another issue that needed to be considered was the new prison and its inmate population. Maureen added “Of course, much concern was raised about how the disease was transmitted and who was at risk, with the opening of the state prison in Branch County. Many hours were spent in meetings and providing education to alleviate these concerns.”

In 2000, P.A. 209 was passed which modified the premarital educational requirement. Now marriage license applicants receive educational materials instead from the county clerk regarding prenatal care, HIV/AIDS and STD transmission and certify by checking a box that they have received these materials. The prison’s mandatory HIV testing of all persons admitted to state correctional facilities, unless a person has previously undergone an HIV test within the previous three months, is still required.

Today, the health department continues to provide AIDS/HIV and STD education through the local schools being careful to comply with P.A. 226 and other school mandates. They also provide AIDS/HIV counseling and testing services and will increase the availability for STD testing in the new year.

There are many lessons to be learned from the 1980s – but the biggest one –is that prevention and personal responsibility do impact the length and quality of life – and that for the most part, these are factors that **are** under an individual’s control. We are still learning that lesson – as we turn our attention to today’s number one public health problem – obesity.

To learn more about your local health department and how we can better serve you, check out our website at www.bhsj.org.

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