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‘A Nation’s Health is a Nation’s Wealth’:  
Perceptions of ‘Health’, 1890-1914

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## Abstract

This thesis is an examination of the way health issues were perceived in New Zealand from 1890 to 1914. It investigates how these views changed and the manner in which they were reflected in health policies and programmes. Perceptions of health are examined within their social, political and cultural context. It is argued that in the period from 1890 to 1914 health issues were increasingly prominent on the public agenda. The nineteenth century was characterised by a distinct lack of interest in health, primarily because New Zealand was believed to be an inherently healthy country. From the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this view was challenged by the growing importance of medical science, the increasing influence of the medical profession and a number of public health scares. With the biomedical revolution of the 1880s there was more scope for human intervention in health matters and a different understanding of health. More frequent debates about health increasingly characterised the health status of the population as a national asset. New Zealand's strength as a nation was thought to be connected with its health. This shift in perceptions was related to increasing government intervention to control and protect its population's health. The Liberal Government responded to this need by incorporating health into their programme of government intervention through a centralised bureaucracy. By looking at a number of health policies in their socio-political context this thesis provides a holistic view of the history of health in New Zealand. From this framework of analysis a number of broader themes are discussed: the changing role of medicine, the role of the government in providing for health, New Zealand's relationship with Britain, and the construction of a national identity.

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# Abbreviations

<i>AJHR</i>	Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives
<i>BMA</i>	British Medical Association
<i>NZG</i>	New Zealand Gazette
<i>NZJH</i>	New Zealand Journal of History
<i>NZMA</i>	New Zealand Medical Association
<i>NZMJ</i>	New Zealand Medical Journal
<i>NZPD</i>	New Zealand Parliamentary Debates
<i>NZS</i>	New Zealand Statutes
<i>WTU</i>	Alexander Turnbull Library

## Preface

This thesis examines issues relating to health in New Zealand in the period from 1890 to 1914. In particular it investigates changing perceptions of health and locates these in wider socio-political concerns and anxieties. It is a study of ideas. It is not possible to discuss every perception of health held in this period; rather this thesis examines ideas which were prominent on the public agenda. This ideas-based study brings together a number of different perspectives to provide a multi-layered examination of health. That is, it displays how health issues were important not only for their health-related significance but also because they often reflected broader social and political concerns and trends.

This study of perceptions of health has been arranged chronologically and by broad themes. Chapter One discusses the approaches other historians have made towards the area of health and places the arguments proposed in this thesis within that context.

Chapter Two provides a discussion of pre-1900 health issues and argues that in the nineteenth century health concerns were not so prominent; New Zealand, in both popular and medical frameworks, was commonly believed to be a healthy country. It is argued that health was viewed in environmental terms. Maori, at the time of contact, were believed to be a strong, healthy race because of New Zealand's

climatic advantages. In turn, it was thought that the Pakeha settlers would be able to benefit from this advantageous climate. By the close of the nineteenth century, however, these views were beginning to be challenged, particularly by the medical profession.

Chapter Three looks at these challenges and suggests that 1900 was a turning point in ideas about health with the first questioning of the state of health in New Zealand prompted by the bubonic plague scare. It is suggested that the external threat of the plague highlighted concerns about New Zealand's sanitary state: the first occasion that health issues were perceived as a threat to the entire nation. The emphasis on sanitation is likely to have been influenced by the growing knowledge about the bio-medical developments of the late nineteenth century.

Questions about New Zealand's healthy state led to the establishment of the Department of Public Health. The creation of the Department, along with a survey of its early work, is incorporated in Chapter Four. It is argued that this was the first major recognition of health as a national asset and highlights the growing significance of health issues. Maori health work is discussed and parallels are drawn with broader health policy. The chapter also stresses the importance of the Liberal Party in the direction of and emphasis placed on health policies.

Chapter Five is based around the theme of degeneration and it is argued that concerns about degeneration and the related anxiety about the low birth-rate had a profound impact on perceptions of health. Concerns in New Zealand were stimulated by similar anxieties in other parts of the British Empire. New Zealand's health was seen as a facet of the strength of the British Empire. It is argued that much of the response to these anxieties was directed at infant and child health: the 'future' of the nation.

The response to growing anxieties about health in the early twentieth century was embodied in the implementation of a number of policies which increasingly restricted and controlled society in general and the practice of medicine in particular. This is the focus of Chapter Six. It discusses a number of pieces of legislation which have otherwise been viewed in isolation and argues that these policies were a result of



increasing concerns about New Zealand's health and part of the desire to create a 'healthy society'.

A number of different primary sources have been used in this thesis to assess changes in perceptions of health, particularly public opinion and government attitudes about health. It has not been possible to carry out extensive primary research into every event and policy covered in this thesis, but a number of sources have been chosen which gauge the opinion of different sectors of society. One of the most useful sources has been a number of contemporary pamphlets, particularly those held at the Alexander Turnbull Library and the Auckland Institute and Museum Library. These include Plunket Society pamphlets, speeches and articles written by doctors and health officials, government department publications and other pressure group material and propaganda. These have been particularly useful because they often display strongly held opinions about the state of New Zealand's health and other health related matters. Much of this material was circulated throughout most levels of society and was often targeted at a different audience than say, for example, government department reports.

Newspapers were another effective gauge of wider public opinion of the time. A selection of newspapers has been chosen: two of these, the *Press* and the *New Zealand Mail*, because of their extensive indexes, which are held at the National Library. The indexes made the newspaper research, which can otherwise be rather overwhelming, much easier and more complete. Other newspapers which have been looked at are the *New Zealand Herald* and the *Auckland Weekly News*. The *Press* and the *New Zealand Herald* were daily papers which were primarily news focused and the other two papers had more feature articles and non-news related material. Advertisements in newspapers were also a useful gauge of the prevalence of non-standard medical treatments which played an important part in health debates. Numerous articles in the *New Zealand Medical Journal (NZMJ)* gave the medical context of health issues and thus provided an important source.

The most useful official publication was the Department of Public Health's Annual Reports in the *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives (AJHR)*. These reports included a wealth of material and the opinions of key health

officials came through very strongly. Other reports of Native Medical Officers and the Education Department were also of use. The *Parliamentary Debates* also provided an excellent portrayal of the government's intentions, contentious issues and a variety of opinions on every issue. Specific reports in the *British Parliamentary Papers* and Australian Royal Commissions were also valuable official sources and highlighted debates in other parts of the British Empire.

Unfortunately there was only a limited amount of relevant primary material at Archives New Zealand. There were few Department of Public Health archives before 1920 and they primarily consisted of material such as local boards of health reports, which detailed numbers of infectious diseases. There was a small body of material in the Internal Affairs Department and the Maori Affairs Department. The archival material was generally lacking material on public health issues and debates, the primary concern of this thesis. Much has been written by historians in the area of health and debates which are relevant to this thesis are considered in Chapter One.