

The Medicine Showdown

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A Public Health Discussion Guide

The Medicine Showdown is an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *Enemy of the People*. One of the central conflicts in both plays centers on the clash between siblings. In *Enemy of the People*, Peter Stockman, is the mayor of a coastal Norwegian town; he is a strong advocate for the town's municipal baths because they attract tourists and constitute a much needed source of economic stability for the town. Stockman's younger brother Tom is a physician who discovers that the water source for the municipal baths is contaminated; he contends that the situation represents a severe threat to anyone who uses that facility.

The Medicine Showdown, takes place in 1918 in the town of Norwich, GA, which is also a town with a fragile economy. Mayor Peter Stockman anticipates the annual arrival of a troupe of medicine show performers whose "free" shows draw audiences from surrounding communities and annually brings a much needed financial boost to local businesses. Armed with information that the influenza pandemic has already affected other nearby communities, Norwich's town physician, Dr. Claudia Hill (the Mayor's younger sister) wants to cancel the medicine show because a large public gathering could bring the deadly pandemic to Norwich. Unconvinced of the threat, Mayor Stockman rallies local residents and businessmen to his side. In both *The Medicine Showdown* and *Enemy of the People*, the ensuing conflict results in efforts to denigrate the doctors and the subsequent failure to implement an appropriate public health strategy.

The Ibsen play also inspired Steven Spielberg's 1975 film *Jaws*, where the residents of Amity Island, like those in the towns characterized above, are dependent on the tourist trade for their livelihood. Influenced by the mayor and city council, they choose to keep their beaches open in spite of evidence from the police chief and visiting marine scientist that a gigantic great white shark roams the waters.

Thus, in *Jaws*, *The Medicine Showdown*, and *Enemy of the People* we see another central theme: when the public is faced with the dilemma of taking action to prevent a tangible public health threat (with the caveat that such action may lead to an equally tangible threat to their economy), they often choose not to act.

Questions for Discussion

1. Claudia Hill's recommendation to postpone the Medicine Show is based on the reality that large public gatherings in Norwich are likely to lead to a public health disaster. The mayor and his supporters took actions to diminish Dr. Hill's credibility by contending that her position: (1) was unrealistic and even hysterical (2) did not give credit to the capacity of Norwich residents to make an informed decision, and (3) would lead to a shut down of the show and would have the effect of undermining the town's economic future.

Question: Do you see any similarity between the actions taken in *The Medicine Showdown* and those taken to address contemporary health issues such as tobacco use, childhood immunization or health care reform?

2. In a conversation with her assistant Roy, Dr. Hill urges Roy and his wife not to go to the medicine show. He responds by asking her, “what if the flu don’t come to Norwich?” Dr. Hill says “Then we should consider ourselves among the blessed few.” But Roy informs Dr. Hill that what he meant was: “what happens to all of us if we shut everything down?” He says that a shut down would result in his wife losing her job because hotels won’t need maids.

Question: What insight does this scene offer to those with the either the responsibility for designing public health campaigns or trying to improve health communication in general?

3. **Question: In rank order from “most” to “least,” which of the following would you say is most responsible for what went wrong in Norwich? (1) capitalism, which fosters economic competition and a desire to make money; (2) democracy, which allows citizens to elect leaders, such as Mayor Peter Stockman; (3) propaganda, which often uses unscrupulous tactics in attempts to persuade people to accept a particular viewpoint; (4) weak public health policies, (5) fear by citizens that the risk of an severe economic turndown was greater than the risk of an influenza outbreak; (6) inability of Dr. Hill to communicate the seriousness, and long term effects of taking no action.**
4. **Question: Consider two long standing aphorisms: “the love of money is the root of all evil” and “an expert is some one from out of town.” Explain how both come into play in *The Medicine Showdown* and comment their implications for those responsible for implementing public health initiatives.**

5. In a private discussion with Dr. Hill, Mayor Peter Stockman reveals his public health resolution for influenza – it includes hand washing and self-examination for symptoms but does not prohibit public gatherings. Following that declaration, the following exchange occurs:

The Mayor: “. . .the way things are going to happen, in the town I was elected to run. I will present the best information I have and let them decide for themselves.”

Dr. Hill: Sometimes they shouldn’t decide for themselves! People don’t want to upset the status quo. They are terrified of change and despise the inconvenience.

The Mayor: “I have a little more faith in them than that”

Dr. Hill: Then you are a damn fool. The majority of these people will want the show to go on because they like it! Sometime you just have to tell them what is right. .

During the past two decades, community-based participatory research (CBPR) has emerged as a key strategy for preparing effective community health promotion programs.

Question: In the dialog above, one of the characters uses a key CBPR principle. Who was it? Did it have an effect on the outcome of the play?

6. Earlier this year the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global H1N1 influenza pandemic. CDC has provided guidance for the public on what to do if they become sick with flu-like symptoms, including infection with H1N1. CDC also has issued instructions on

taking care of a sick person at home and the use of facemasks and respirators to reduce transmission. CDC recommended taking everyday preventive actions to stop the spread of germs, including frequent hand washing and people who are sick should stay home and avoid contact with others in order to limit further spread of the disease.

Question: Do these CDC recommendations come closer to Dr. Hill's recommendations or the strategy developed by Mayor Stockman and Dr. Eggerton?