

CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES  
WESTERN RESERVE STUDIES SYMPOSIUM

**BUILDING A MEDICAL COMMUNITY  
IN THE WESTERN RESERVE**

October 12-13 2001

Allen Memorial Medical Library  
Ford Auditorium

**Smallpox, The Chamber of Commerce, and the Reshaping  
of the City's Public Health Department in the Early 20th  
Century**

Patsy Gerstner

Health, once the concern of the individual and family, became the concern of municipalities as cities were urbanized within an ever-increasing industrial base. Epidemic disease was the reason most public health boards were convened in the United States in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the end of the century, broader issues, such as sanitation and infant mortality, were public health issues as well. In spite of increased responsibility and a rapidly growing population, during the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Cleveland's public health officers were working under laws and a sanitary code described as "largely obsolete and twenty years behind the times." When the city was threatened with a potentially disastrous smallpox epidemic, forces outside the health department, notably the Chamber of Commerce, became concerned with the state of the department. While the initial interest of the Chamber of Commerce was in protecting the citizens of Cleveland from smallpox, their actions resulted in a new health code for the city and in a reorganization of the public health department.