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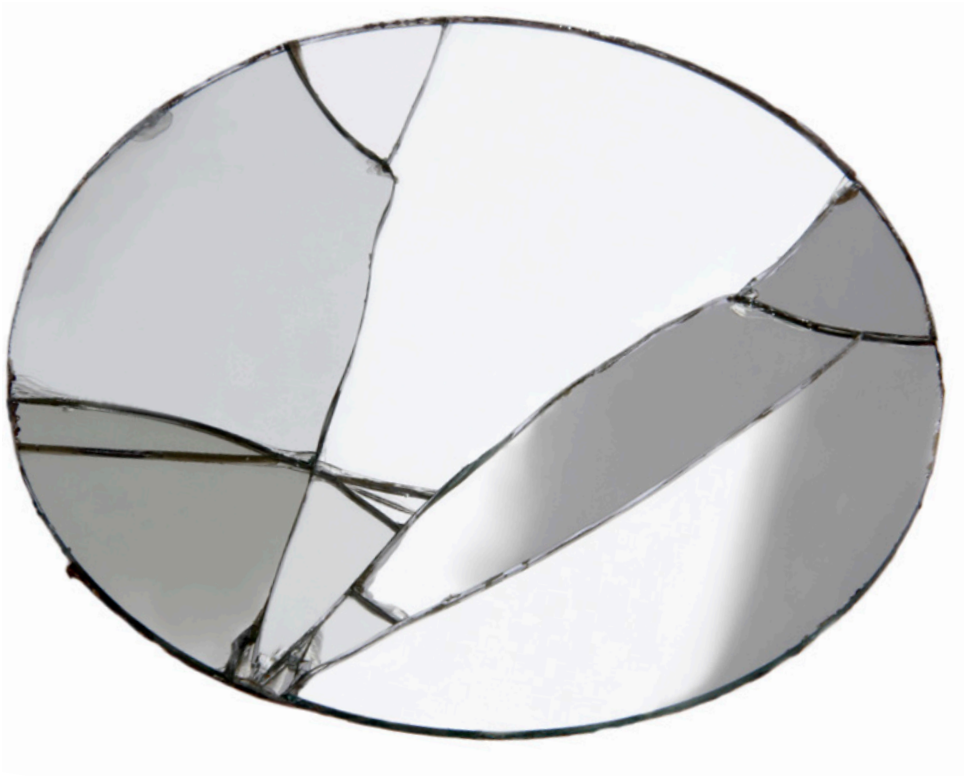

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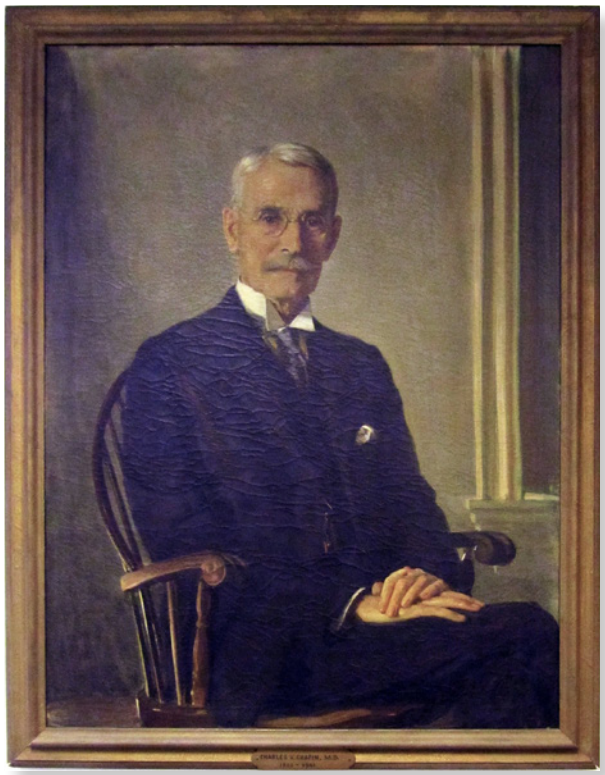
Charles V. Chapin, MD: 'Dean of City Health Officers'

MARY KORR
RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR



Charles V. Chapin, MD, was Superintendent of Health for the City of Providence from 1884 until 1932 and a pioneer in epidemiology and public health.

The Rhode Island Medical Society described **DR. CHARLES V. CHAPIN** (1856–1941) as "the greatest physician who has yet lived in Rhode Island," Dr. Seebert J. Goldowsky wrote in the August 1979 issue of the *Rhode Island Medical Journal*.

"His credo is best expressed in his words: 'Science can never be a closed book. It is like a tree, ever growing, ever reaching new heights. Occasionally the lesser branches, no longer giving nourishment to the tree, slough off. We should not be ashamed to change our methods; rather we should be ashamed never to do so. We should try new things, but should show common sense about it.' "

Dr. Chapin was a graduate of Brown University, where he later taught physiology, and Bellevue Hospital Medical College in New York City. He became Providence's second superintendent of health in 1884, succeeding Dr. Edgar Snow, at the young age of 28.

In 1910, Dr. Chapin published *The Sources and Modes of Infection,* which became a public health classic and secured his preeminence in the nascent field of epidemiology. Largely through his efforts the Providence City Hospital opened in 1910, for the treatment of patients with communicable diseases.

According to Dr. Goldowsky, Dr. Chapin instituted the aseptic nursing techniques there which "he had seen applied at the immaculate Pasteur Hospital in Paris." Dr. Chapin ultimately proved to many doubting physicians that contagious diseases were not spread airborne, but as the result of contact.

In 1916, Dr. Chapin called for the establishment of sick baby clinics; more nurses in the health department, implementation of bacterial standards for the milk supply; dental dispensaries for children, a medical service for the care of the sick poor in their homes and increased wards for the care of tuberculosis patients.

"It will doubtless be objected this is socialism. So it is, and so is our system of public education, and our city water supply and our municipal pier and garbage collection and the proposed removal of ashes…it is for the citizens to determine whether they wish to purchase it," he wrote.

In 1927, the Rhode Island Medical Society held an appreciation for Dr. Chapin at the unveiling of his portrait in the medical library building. George R. Vincent, president of the Rockefeller Foundation, gave the address.

"We make heroes of men who lead soldiers to death upon the battlefield; tonight we exalt and honor a hero who through his long life of valuable, keen, faithful work, has safeguarded the lives of many, many people in his own city, in his own land and in lands beyond the sea," he said.

During Dr. Chapin's administration the death rate in Providence dropped 30 per cent and infant mortality was reduced by 50 per cent. When he resigned his city post in 1932, the Rhode Island Medical Society adopted a resolution, stating: "In the city, his two greatest achievements lie. First, in lifting Providence from a condition of well nigh medieval squalor in 1884 – to the hygienic and sanitary perfection of today – and second, in the founding of our City Hospital and its later organization, in which he played so important part."

In 1910, Dr. Chapin published *The Sources and Modes of Infection,* which became a public health classic and secured his preeminence in the nascent field of epidemiology.

In 1931, the Providence City Hospital was renamed the Charles V. Chapin Hospital in his honor; it closed its doors in 1966, when a hospital for communicable diseases was no longer needed.

When he retired at age 76, the *American Journal of Public Health* observed: "With no disrespect to anyone, it may be said without any fear of contradiction that Dr. Chapin has occupied for many years the position of Dean of City Health Officers."

Dr. Chapin died on January 31, 1941 at the age of 84. ❖