



# POLICY FORUM

## *Breaking the Cycle*

### Introduction

It's barely 200 years since John Snow described the association of pumps and pipes with cholera in London. It's only five years since we learned that General Motors had abandoned the corrosive water of Flint, Michigan, and Dr. Mona Hanna-Attish crusaded against the lead leached from the solder in water lines fed by the Flint River. Not cholera, but learning disabilities, flowed from those pipes.

Novelists, not scientists, publicized the perils of the early industrial age. A mere 50 years separate Charles Dickens from Theodore Dreiser and their descriptions of the degradation of decrepit housing, the suffocating smog- and soot-filled air of the industrial revolution. Just 20 years later the progressive muckrakers Upton Sinclair, Ida Tarbell, and Lincoln Steffens exposed the meatpacking industry, poor housing, exploitative monopolies, the unchecked illness that resulted, and the political corruption that let them flourish. The plague of tuberculosis was already fading years before the Nobel Prize was awarded for discovery of the antibiotics to treat it, because tenements had been demolished and crowded housing diminished.

So many decades later, in this edition of the *North Carolina Medical Journal*, we look at housing, water, contaminants, and even rural life itself as precursors of disease. No surprise, and yet, it's been less than three years since we learned that a ZIP code can predict longevity.

Let's not again let decades pass without addressing these social determinants of health. NCMJ

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