The Norwegian Women’s Public Health Association are the fruits of many years of dedication by large numbers of women who receive strong support from the general population.

The Norwegian Women’s Public Health Association was founded in Kristiania (now Oslo) on the initiative of Mrs Fredrikke Marie Qvam in 1896. At that time the main purpose was to provide medical supplies and emergency equipment for use during war as well as in peacetime crises, and considerable importance was also attached to training women in nursing and first aid. Fredrikke Marie Qvam became the Association’s first President, a position she held for 37 years.

The Association is Norway’s largest women’s organization with humanitarian aims. Today there are some 180,000 members attached to 2500 branches. The Association’s overall activities are managed by a board of directors supported by a secretariat. The practical tasks are done by the branches, whose working conditions and opportunities vary greatly. Since 1916 the Association has published Folkehelsen, a public health journal that comes out six times a year. It has a circulation of about 150,000 and is the main link between the Association and its members.

Preparedness

In addition to maintaining stocks of medical supplies and emergency equipment, a majority of the branches still maintain a supply of beds, bed clothes and equipment for private nursing.

At the beginning of the Second World War the Association organized 159 field hospitals with a total of 2000 beds. After the war the Association provided training for women in first aid and nursing, enabling them to serve as volunteers in hospitals and emergency centres. Over the years the Association has offered first aid courses to the public, and in 1951 published a book on the subject.

In 1948 the National Board for Medical Emergency Planning and Preparedness was established. Together with other private health organizations the Association offered its cooperation. In 1972, at the request of the Association, the Board issued guidelines indicating the principal tasks in preparedness work, among them the storage of woollen blankets, stretchers and babies’ clothes. The Association is also represented in the Home Guard and the Council for Civil Defence. Through the Cooperation Council for Women’s Voluntary Defence Organization

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The Association works with other women’s organizations both centrally and locally in preparedness matters.

The Association began to train nurses in 1898. A nursing school was founded by the Oslo branch, and other branches subsequently did likewise. By 1963 nursing was being taught in four Association schools in different towns. The training accorded with government directives and lasted three years. Later the public health authorities took over these schools, the last at the end of 1985.

Training courses for auxiliary nurses were introduced by the Association’s Sør-Trøndelag region in their locally owned hospital in 1948. In 1962 the Ministry of Health issued directives for an eight months’ training course in practical nursing. It proved such a success that the training period was later extended to a complete school year.

Disease control

In 1899, a year before Norway passed its Tuberculosis Act, the Association started its work in this field. A nationwide information campaign was given top priority. The first public exhibition on tuberculosis was organized by the Oslo branch, which in 1903 opened the country’s first sanatorium for tubercular patients. At the outbreak of the Second World War the Association had 36 homes for people suffering from tuberculosis, as well as a number of clinics for specified groups of patients. There were homes for children exposed to the threat of the disease, open-air schools, and flats for families who had been exposed to infection. By 1960 there were about 60 clinics and homes. These institutions were later redesigned for other purposes as the prevalence of tuberculosis declined.

The Association first directed its attention to cancer in 1916. Financial contributions have been made to Norway’s main hospital for the treatment of cancer, and information about the disease has been disseminated. Some branches support diagnostic clinics in the detection of breast cancer and cervical cancer. The Association joined the Norwegian Cancer Society in 1948. Nearly all the Association’s branches participate in fund-raising and information campaigns on behalf of the Cancer Society.

In 1929 rheumatism was the main topic at the Association’s national convention. An enormous effort has been made in the fight against this disease, with fund-raising and the planning and building of hospitals, baths, and physiotherapy centres. The first Norwegian hospital dedicated to the treatment of rheumatism was opened by the Association in Oslo in 1938. Thirty years later it was recognized as a teaching hospital. The Oslo branch is still the owner, although the government now finances the running of the hospital. The Association makes large financial contributions towards the hospital’s research programme. This institution has won international acclaim for its achievements in both treatment and research. Three other institutions for the treatment of rheumatism have been established by other branches.

In 1947 the Association and the Norwegian Society for Rheumatology formed the Norwegian Rheumatism Council, which was later joined by the Norwegian Rheumatics’ League. In 1964 a nationwide campaign raised approximately a million dollars. The
Association’s institutions were granted shares of this sum, and funds were provided for establishing the State Hospital’s Institute for Rheumatological Research, now called the Institute for General and Rheumatological Immunology.

In 1972 the Association began to take an active interest in illness related to digestive and nutritional problems. Branches are asked to participate in health promotion work in this field and to contribute to a fund providing scholarships in gastrointestinal research.

In 1973 the Association, in cooperation with other humanitarian organizations, established a guidance centre for the relatives of drug abusers in Oslo. Besides working with relatives, the centre has been incessantly engaged in public relations activities. The Association regards this as pioneering work and therefore guarantees to meet some of the running expenses. Similar centres are now being supported in three more towns.

The Association is actively involved in health promotion. As early as 1903 the Association’s first leaflet on appetizing and nutritious food appeared for distribution among its members and the public.

**The handicapped**

In 1962 the Association introduced a support programme for physically disabled housewives. Many branches have taken up work for spastic children. Support has been given to physically disabled persons and others with a limited choice of vocation, including people suffering from multiple sclerosis.

The Association has always been engaged in the care of the mentally ill. Since 1951 when the Coordination Committee for Work for the Mentally Retarded in Norway came into existence, this activity has been intensified. The Association contributed funds to a children’s mental day clinic for some years, and paid a social worker’s salary at the State Hospital’s Department for Child Psychiatry for a period. In 1970 a branch opened a psychiatric after-treatment home. Small apartments were offered to residential patients, and day patients were welcomed. Occupational therapy plays an important part in the treatment programme.

**Mothers and children**

Experience gained in the field of nutrition led to the foundation of health centres for mothers and children. The first opened in Oslo in 1914. Few tasks have been dearer to the hearts of our members than their work for these centres. In the 1960s the branches were running 650 health control centres, mainly serving babies and small children. In certain areas, pregnant women and housewives were invited to have routine medical examinations at the centres.

The 1972 Act on Health Promotion Work for Children led to a radical change in the tasks of the branches. Financial responsibility for the health centres was given to the local authorities, while public health nurses were made administratively responsible. The health centres’ established role in preventive medicine ensured close cooperation between the public health authorities and the Association’s members.
Since 1952 the Association has been increasingly involved in organizing medical examinations of housewives. This activity reached its peak in 1977. The next step was to include senior citizens in the programme.

Research on children's diseases has been supported since 1959 by means of grants given to the children's clinic at the State Hospital. A small research laboratory was set up and later became the Pediatric Research Institute. The care of children has traditionally been a matter of particular interest to the younger members of the Association, which today runs a large number of kindergartens, nursery schools, and infants' homes. Formerly, children's holiday camps and holiday homes were organized by many branches.

The elderly

In 1951 the Association began to cooperate with the Norwegian National Health Association, another nongovernmental organization, in health and welfare work among elderly people. Today nearly every branch is involved in activities of this kind. The building of nursing homes and flats for retired people is receiving increasing attention. In 1969 a course was devised to give the Association's members a theoretical background in the problems of aging, with a view to motivating women to join the voluntary visiting service in hospitals, old age homes, and private homes.

Today the Association cooperates with local authorities in the provision of assistance to old people living at home.

In 1958, for the first time in Norway, a home providing for the special needs of patients with senile dementia was opened by the Association. Since then 19 more have been opened. The care of those suffering from senile dementia is of major concern to the Association, not least because they are among the least articulate when it comes to asking the welfare state for improved living conditions.

Courses for members

The Evy Klem courses, named after a former Secretary-General of the Association, aim at qualifying relatively young members to hold office locally. They cover leadership techniques and organizational work. The courses are arranged and delivered by two members of the Association's staff. Simulated elections of office-bearers, membership meetings and recruitment campaigns are organized, and guidance is given on public speaking. By acquiring a sound knowledge of the Association, members become better able to carry out their tasks at the local level. In 1989, 15 courses were given to a total of 364 participants.

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The impressive achievements of the Norwegian Women's Public Health Association are attributable to two principal

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factors: the unflagging efforts of its members over many years and the consistent support of the public. There is every sign that, through the Association, the country’s women will continue to take on new responsibilities in order to tackle new health problems as they arise.