

## We The People

Program 170

Learned Ignorance



Good Day to you. On the 13th of August, 1865, Dr Ignaz Semmelweis died .... a victim of *learned ignorance*. Official records of the time listed the cause of death as puerperal infection, a disease Semmelweis spent most of his life fighting. But the real culprits were medical colleagues, so entrenched in their resistance to his methods that, after 18 years of fighting conventional wisdom and professional ridicule, Semmelweis suffered a complete mental collapse. Dr Semmelweis suffered the fate of those who try to change things. Although he persevered longer than most and paid a bigger ultimate price, Semmelweis came to know the same hostility and rejection that have come to others who challenge prevailing wisdom and dare to show that things might be done differently and better. In those days throughout Europe 30% of women who came to an obstetric clinic to have their babies, died. They could be expected to contract and die of puerperal infection contracted during labour.

Most authorities were convinced that the disease was unpreventable, induced by overcrowding, poor ventilation, or the onset of lactation. Semmelweis not only disagreed, he was blasphemous enough to suggest that the infection was transmitted by physicians themselves. In his earliest test of this idea, he had medical students wash their hands in a solution of chlorinated lime before examining patients. Mortality rates fell immediately in his division to just one percent. His message was simple: if doctors would but wash their hands before examining patients, infection could be minimized and lives could be saved. **Dr Semmelweis was dismissed from the clinic a year later.** What Semmelweis overlooked in his attempt to convince others of the simple expediency of clean hands was the symbolism of the time. Physicians did not want to use a chlorine hand wash because it robbed them of an important sign of status. An accepted practice among physicians in those days was simply to wipe one's hands on their surgical apron after treating a patient. The blood smeared surgical smock came to be a visible sign of one's professional importance. Doctors were not about to give up so handy an index of personal worth just because some crackpot had data to show that they could save lives by washing their hands. They consciously and clearly decided to ignore - indeed, reject factual information in order to protect and retain intact a personally cherished practice. They chose to be ignorant.

Friends, we are faced with a paradox. We usually equate ignorance with a lack of knowledge, with too few opportunities to learn and broaden our repertoires. But, as we can see through the true story of Semmelweis, ignorance itself may be learned when remaining ignorant suits us. We have all courted ignorance from time to time, especially in our adolescent years. But in many of our organizations today, among mature people at all levels and of every persuasion, ignorance is embraced and cherished. Woe be to those who would try to dispel ignorance when it is a source of comfort. In ancient Greece, bearers of bad tidings were killed. Today they are simply ridiculed or mocked or libelled or forced out to pasture. Historians tell us that the downfall of ancient Greece was due more than anything else to hubris, a debilitating arrogance and competitive pride of accomplishment that rendered people so inflexible that they could not deal effectively with changing events. ***Arrogance and pride of position encourage learned ignorance.***

So with all this in mind why are we surprised to find Gold Coast City Council flooded with learned ignorance and intransigence. Why is the truth ignored and why do the Mayor and CEO seem so unwilling to listen to the facts on so many occasions. In the Gold Coast Council elections next year remember Dr Semmelweis and the lesson of learned ignorance and vote accordingly for the good of the Gold Coast.

**Until next time this is Kent Bayley**

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