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HISTORY OF THE WASSERMANN LABORATORY

The Massachusetts State Wassermann Laboratory was established in 1915, through negotiations carried on by Dr. Allen J. McLaughlin, Commissioner of Health of Massachusetts, and Dr. Milton J. Roseneau, Professor of Preventive Medicine and Hygiene at the Harvard Medical School and Director of the Division of Biologic Laboratories. Before this time, the laboratory was a part of the Department of Neuropathology at the Harvard Medical School. It had been established by the late Dr. Elmer E. Southard, in order that there could be an economical means of testing bloods and spinal fluids for the State Hospitals for Mental Diseases. The execution of technique was, at first, carried out by Dr. Frederick P. Gay, who was one of the leading immunologists in America at that time, having studied with Bordet in France and Wassermann in Germany. From the time of its establishment in 1915 to the present, it has been located in the Harvard Medical School.

At first, the activities of the Wassermann Laboratory were confined to the performance of Wassermann tests on bloods and spinal fluids. In 1918, however, the scope of the work was augmented by bacteriological and pathological tests for the Division of Livestock Disease Control, of the State Department of Agriculture. This expansion was effected by the transfer of these activities from the Department of Bacteriology of the Harvard Medical School, to the Wassermann Laboratory, in the interest of economy.

From the very beginning, the bulk of the work performed in the Wassermann Laboratory consisted of serologic tests for syphilis. During the first year, these numbered about 5,000; and there has been a gradual increase up to 1942, when 736,040 serologic tests were performed. This peak of performance was occasioned by the testing of blood of selectees

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in connection with the draft. At present, the laboratory is performing these tests at the rate of approximately 400,000 per year, which would appear to be the normal rate at which they will be done for a number of years to come. Serologic tests for syphilis are performed for physicians, medical institutions, penal institutions, industrial plants (through their industrial physicians), and many other agencies; in fact, this service, which is so helpful as an aid in the diagnosis of syphilis, is extended free to all citizens of Massachusetts. At first, the blood and spinal fluid were tested only by the Wassermann reaction, but as far back as 1924 the Kahn test, though not the official test of the Department, was used in selected cases.

From the very beginning, experimental work on the serology of syphilis was almost continuously a part of the laboratory's activity. This experimental work was being carried on by the Chief of the State Wassermann Laboratory, who was also conducting a study of syphilis and the serology of syphilis at the Boston Dispensary. As a result of the researches carried on in the Wassermann Laboratory and at the Boston Dispensary, the Hinton test for syphilis was devised. This test became the official test of the Department April 1, 1934.

A survey of evaluations conducted jointly by the United States Public Health Service and the American Society of Clinical Pathologists, has shown that since these evaluations were instituted in 1935, the Hinton test, as carried out in this laboratory, has ranked among the first three in nation-wide evaluations involving forty-eight states and the District of Columbia. This has been obtained by the use of a single test, instead of two, three, or more tests, which have been used by some of the States.

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At present, the personnel of the laboratory consists of a Chief of Laboratory, an Assistant Bacteriologist, a Junior Bacteriologist, a Supervising Technician, six Laboratory Assistants, seven Laboratory Helpers, a Senior Clerk-Stenographer, and six Junior Clerk-Stenographers.