



Rotary
Club of Jackson,
Mississippi



Rotagram

April 7, 2025

The Rotary Club of Jackson welcomed **Dr. Thomas Dobbs, Dean of the School of Population Health at the Mississippi Department of Health.**

His presentation was **“The Federal-State Effort To Combat Syphilis.”**



L to R: Dr. Billy Long – (Retired) GI Associates; Dr. Thomas Dobbs, Dean of the School of Population Health at the Mississippi Department of Health; Dr. Deborah Wright, Owner, Sincere Home Care, Inc.; and Rotary President; Owner, Carpenter Properties

President Phillip Carpenter welcomed Rotarians and guests.

He also led the Club in the Four Way Test.

Rob Salley delivered the Invocation.

Bill Moore led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Hap Henley introduced our visitors:

Visitors:

- Donovan Beitel, Mississippi Blind Industries, Executive Director – Guest of Seth Dickinson
- Katie Elliott, Operations Manager, Embark – Guest of Selena Swartzfager
- Winston Ford, Director, Youth Outreach Ministry – Guest of Lee Bush

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

President Phillip Carpenter and President-elect Richard Wilbourn attended the Rotary 6820 and 6820 Multi-District Conference in Cleveland, Mississippi.



BIRTHDAYS:

Keith Ferguson April 7

ROTARY JOIN DATES:

Becky Redd 04/06/2015 10 Years

Monday, March 31, 2025: The Rotary Club of Jackson will welcome Dr. Ligon Duncan, the Chancellor and CEO of Reformed Theological Seminary.

Dr. Billy Long introduced Dr. Thomas Dobbs, Dean, School of Population Health of the Mississippi Department of Health.

Thomas Dobbs assumed the role of Dean of the John D. Bower School of Population Health on August 1, 2022. In addition to his role as Dean, Dr. Dobbs teaches Epidemiology for the School of Population Health and the School of Health-Related Professions. He holds a clinical position within the Division of Infectious Diseases, where he works specifically in HIV and Sexually Transmitted Infections, focusing on the intersection of disease and the social determinants of health.

Dr. Dobbs has a distinguished career spanning the intersection of clinical medicine and public health, serving as a physician, researcher, and public health leader. He has held numerous leadership roles within the Mississippi State Department of Health, including State Epidemiologist and State Health Officer, a role through which he directed the State's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As State Health Officer, Dr. Dobbs focused the agency on addressing the numerous health inequities plaguing our State. Additionally, he has held leadership roles nationally and internationally in the fight against diseases such as HIV and tuberculosis.

There were over 2.4 million sexually transmitted infections reported in the U.S. in 2023. Yet, the rate of sexually transmitted infections appears to be slowing down, according to new data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The CDC report was also optimistic about certain increases. After years of double-digit gains, the overall rate of syphilis increased by 1% nationwide. Nationally, primary and secondary syphilis declined by 10% from 2022. In Mississippi, the number of primary and secondary syphilis cases fell by nearly 3%. However, the cases of babies born with congenital syphilis rose by almost 80%.

"We have a 40% fatal disease that's almost entirely cured by a single shot of penicillin," he said. "That speaks to a system issue. We must get moms into prenatal care better, tested, and treated because it's a simple solution." Congenital syphilis cases rose a thousand percent between 2016 and 2022. When a fetus or baby is left untreated for syphilis, it can cause a range of health issues, including developmental delays, intellectual disability, and stillbirths.

“We have a lot of delayed prenatal care in many counties,” Dr. Dobbs said. “I think that the majority of women are not getting prenatal care in the first trimester for a whole host of reasons.” Dr. Dobbs says a lack of health infrastructure and underinvestment could be behind the rise of this disease. Syphilis testing is now required for pregnant people in their first trimester, third trimester, and at delivery as a part of Mississippi’s efforts to prevent congenital syphilis in infants.

“We’re number two in the country for syphilis, and we’re number one for all other STDs essentially,” stated Dr. Dobbs. He was expressing his heartfelt concerns for the rising number of syphilis cases among newborns here in Mississippi.

Congenital syphilis, a bacterial disease, usually spreads by sexual contact. The bacteria can remain inactive in the body for years before becoming active again.

Syphilis can be passed to unborn children through the placenta or during birth. Most babies with congenital syphilis begin with little to no symptoms.

“A lot of people have syphilis and don’t know it. It’s not something that people realize because it’s kind of an invisible disease for most people, so make sure you know to get tested during pregnancy,” said Dr. Dobbs.

Dr. Dobbs says untreated syphilis can result in life-threatening damage to the heart, brain, and other organs. “If a baby gets syphilis, there’s a high likelihood of severe deformity or even death, and if a woman catches syphilis during her pregnancy, there’s about a 40-percent miscarriage rate. So, it’s devastating for the babies.”

Nationally, the rate of syphilis has increased by 147 percent since 2016. Mississippi has experienced an increase of greater than 900 percent in babies born with syphilis in the past six years. However, Dr. Dobbs says there are ways to prevent and cure the disease.

“It’s usually treated with a shot of penicillin, but we have to find it; we have to get women engaged in prenatal care.”

Dr. Dobbs says early prenatal care is the key to addressing this issue. “Prenatal care is so very important for health and not only diagnosing syphilis and getting moms treated but also for preventing infant mortality and making sure women have healthy pregnancies.”

“The sad thing is if you find a mom early in pregnancy and know that she has syphilis, a single shot of penicillin or single treatment of penicillin will cure the mom and the baby,” he said.

Mississippi was one of just six states that did not require syphilis testing during

pregnancy. On March 7, 2023, the Mississippi State Department of Health began mandating congenital syphilis testing during the first trimester or first prenatal appointment, during the third trimester, and again at birth. Increasing diagnoses of STIs led to the requirement.

Dr. Dobbs said part of the reason syphilis and STI cases are increasing is that the Mississippi Legislature cut public health funding before the COVID-19 pandemic. In recent years, MSDH has closed or limited hours at dozens of regional and local clinics across the state.

MORE PHOTOS



Howard Catchings



Winston Ford and Lee Bush



Katie Elliott and Selena Swartzfager