Stigma

The stigma associated with leprosy is deeply ingrained in human history. Many religious traditions considered the disease a "curse from God" rather than a medical condition. Fear that the disease was highly contagious (it is not) led to quarantine.
The Germ

Mycobacterium leprae, the germ that causes leprosy, is a bacillus. It is related to tuberculosis (T.B.), but unlike T.B., leprosy is not easy to catch. Only 5% of the world's population is susceptible to the disease. In the 20th century, "leprosy" was renamed "Hansen's disease" in honor of Dr. Hansen's historic achievement.
Effects on the Body

Fingers and toes can become deformed over time due to nerve damage with subsequent injury and tissue absorption.

Hansen's disease affects the nerves and skin. Nerve damage can cause muscle weakness and lack of feeling. Repetitive injury and infection over time can create deformity. The eyes can also become damaged resulting in blindness.
The Louisiana Leper Home was established in 1892 following passage of Act 85 which required all people with leprosy in Louisiana to be confined in an institution. In 1894, Act 80 created a Board of Control for the Louisiana Leper Home. The board selected a site for the home in Carville, Louisiana.
Daughters of Charity

The Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul arrived in 1896 to nurse the patients and provide management of the Louisiana Leper Home. The Catholic order of nursing sisters served their Catville mission until 2005.
The Louisiana Leper Home was intended for Louisiana patients only. Other U.S. states wanted a quarantine location for their leprosy patients and pressured the U.S. government to create a national quarantine hospital.
Chaulmoogra oil, pressed from the seeds of a tree found in India, was the standard treatment for leprosy at the Louisiana Leper Home. It was applied either using oil oaked gauze, by injections or in pill form. Unfortunately, chaulmoogra oil gave little or no medical benefit.
In 1917, the U.S. Congress passed S. 4086, a bill for the Care and Treatment of Persons Afflicted with Leprosy. In 1921 Carville became the National Leprosarium, admitting patients from any state that had a law quarantining leprosy.
State to Federal Transfer

In 1921, when the Leprosarium was transferred from the state to the federal government, the U.S. Public Health Service was assigned to provide medical care for patients who arrived from around the U.S. As a result of federal involvement, the Daughters of Charity became federal employees and the hospital was expanded and modernized.
"Regulations Governing the Care of Lepers: Regulations for the Government of Leprosaria and for the Apprehension, Detention, Treatment and Release of Lepers" were drawn up by the Surgeon General in 1922 to carry out the 1917 legislation.
Federal Hospital

By 1941, the federal government had rebuilt the hospital to house 450 patients. Personnel had their own neighborhood, separate from the patients. The hospital complex had a water treatment plant, electric plant, laundries, golf courses, chapels, dormitories, recreation center and modern infirmary. It was a self-contained community.
The mission of the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps is to protect, promote and advance the health and safety of the United States. The U.S.P.H.S. at Carville became world leaders in the treatment, research and rehabilitation of Hansen's disease.
Sulfone Treatment

Dr. Guy Faget called for patient volunteers to try a new treatment in 1941, the sulfone drug Promin. Promin treatment was given by intravenous injections. According to The Star, "new treatment renewed hope that leprosy ultimately will be conquered." (February, 1944)
In the 1950s, following 10 years of increasingly successful sulphone drug therapy, scores of patients were medically discharged. Those who were newly diagnosed had the option to receive treatment from a doctor outside of the hospital.
Over 5,000 patients had lived at Carville while receiving treatment between 1894 and 1999. All ages, cultures, races and socio-economic groups were represented. No matter the race or country of origin, men are diagnosed twice as often with H.D.
Carville Culture

Carville's hospital developed its own culture. Holidays were celebrated with a unique flair, from Mardi Gras to Halloween. Many patients ran their own businesses, played team sports, belonged to religious organizations and even published their own newspaper - The STAR.
Patients lost many civil rights in the early decades of quarantine. In the 1940s, patients protested through their magazine, The STAR. Groups like Disabled American Veterans joined the fight. The patients' right to vote was restored in the late 1940s and their right to marry in the 1950s.
Veterans

The American Legion formed a post at the hospital in the early 1930s. Patient veterans took an active part in lobbying congress for hospital improvements. The 40 and 8, an independent fraternal organization of U.S. veterans, took up the cause of the patient newspaper "The STAR".
Rehabilitation

Ors. Paul and Margaret Brand arrived at Carville in the 1960s and established the first Rehabilitation-Research Program for H.D. patients. Their work led to new techniques in reconstructive surgery, repetitive pressure studies and advancements in the care of the eye that improved the health and welfare of H.D. patients worldwide.
The germ that causes Hansen's disease, M. leprae, cannot be cultured in the lab. Researchers looked for an animal that could be infected with M. leprae for decades. In 1971, the armadillo was successfully infected. Research continues at Louisiana State University with a focus on finding a vaccine.
Treatment Today

Blister packs are distributed to patients around the world by the World Health Organization (W.H.O.). Prednisone and Thalidomide are commonly used to treat immunological reactions that may damage the skin and nerves.

Dapsone, Rifampin and Clofazimine are the 3 most common drugs used to fight the leprosy infection.

Today, Hansen's disease is an outpatient disease. The most commonly used drugs in Hansen's disease treatment are Dapsone, Rifampin and Clofazimine. In most new cases, patients will take multi-drug therapy for 1-2 years. Outpatient clinics around the U.S. provide patients with medications and support.