

Reeve (J. T.)

Leprosy in Wisconsin (?)

J. T. Reeve.

1883



LEPROSY IN WISCONSIN.

THE SANITARY NEWS has recently noticed in several foreign and domestic papers, statements as to the alarming prevalence of leprosy in Wisconsin, one of which even stated that "unless prompt measures" were soon taken the state would be "terribly afflicted." Doubting the accuracy of these statements, a letter was addressed to Dr. J. T. Reeve, secretary of the Wisconsin state board of health, asking for the exact facts as regards leprosy in that state. The following is his reply:

EDITOR OF THE SANITARY NEWS:—Your letter referring to a statement which has appeared in several papers, that leprosy in a highly contagious form exists and is spreading with comparative rapidity in Wisconsin, is duly received. You ask for the exact facts in the case, which are as follows:

The article referred to is wholly untrue and sensational. It appeared first in *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, and was published on the authority of a physician of that city, the editor himself, in a brief editorial in the same issue, expressing doubt of its accuracy. The truthfulness of the statement was at once denied by myself and by others, and the physician who is responsible for the story was publicly requested to furnish to the state board of health any evidence he had of the existence of any cases of the disease in the state, that it might be fully investigated. He has not only failed to do so, but he declines when privately solicited through the editor of the *Sentinel* to allow his name to be given to the state board of health for personal correspondence. The inference is irresistible that the author of the story that leprosy exists in Wisconsin has no evidence which he can present to prove his assertions.

So much for the sensational statement referred to, but I may add the following facts which, though it is known that leprosy has been brought into the North-western states in a few instances by immigrants, chiefly from Norway, will show, I think quite conclusively, that there is no occasion for alarm therefrom, and which render it doubtful if there is now even one genuine case of this disease in Wisconsin.

1. The whole number of cases that have been brought to us in this way is very small, and *none* have originated in this state so far as can be ascertained by careful inquiry. Dr. Hoegh, of this Board, who has an extensive acquaintance among Norwegians, and who so long ago as 1869, instituted special inquiry by circulars concerning the prevalence of leprosy among them, could then learn of but two or three cases, and having ever since kept up an interest in this investigation, he has in these fourteen years seen but four cases, two, at least, if not all of which are now dead.

Dr. Hoegh's opportunity for knowing whether leprosy exists in Wisconsin or not, is therefore exceptionally good, and his opinion may safely be accepted as authority, yet in a recent article to a Norwegian paper he characterizes *The Sentinel* informant's story as utterly groundless.

2. Since the appearance of the article in question, there has been held a meeting of the district medical association which embraces that section of the state in which leprosy is said to be prevalent and at which there was present a full representation of the medical men who, of all others, would be most likely to be well informed concerning it, yet, the subject being presented, not one of them knew of a single case in the state. Two cases had been seen, the one five years ago, the other twelve years ago, but both were dead.

3. The state board of health of Wisconsin has official reporters in every county and in nearly every township in the state, and in addition, it has special correspondents at most of the important points, by whom it has during each of the last six years been informed concerning the diseases that are prevalent in their respective localities. Many of these men are acute observers, quick to notice and to report the prevalence, or the existence of any case of unusual or of dangerous disease, yet from none of these men has there ever been reported any cases of leprosy except those which have herein been referred to.

4. It is thus evident that if leprosy exists at all in Wisconsin the number of cases must be *exceedingly* small, and that in the rare cases in which it has been imported into the Northwest by immigrants, its tendency has been to die with the patient, that its reputed hereditary character has been rarely if at all manifested, and that in no case is there any evidence that it has been spread by contagion though there has apparently been no separation of the leprous from their families or friends. In proof of these statements there are now living in Wisconsin in Minnesota, and in Iowa the perfectly healthy widows, children and grandchildren of those who were lepers

Very Respectfully,

J. T. REEVE,

Secretary State Board Health.

Appleton, Wis., Aug. 27, 1883.

