SAM/143 D.

Letters

The Issue of 'Bad Heredity'

In the last issue of *Stanford M.D.* you reprinted an interview with Dr. William Shockley which appeared originally in *U.S. News and World Report.* This kind of pseudo-scientific justification for class and race prejudice is so hackneyed that we would not ordinarily have cared to react to it. However, Professor Shockley's standing as a Nobel Laureate and as a colleague at Stanford, and now the appearance of his article with a label of Stanford medicine, creates a situation where our silence could leave the false impression that we share or even acquiesce in his outlook, which we certainly do not.

Professor Shockley has made some constructive suggestions—the essentiality of more research on genetic factors in social maladjustment, and certainly the need for more creative imagination than we now observe in planning social welfare and in education. However, we deplore his innuendos about the hereditary basis of the purported intellectual and social deficits of Negroes, and the tone of his entire discussion about "bad heredity." Why did he not trot out the "scientific documentation" of the Jukes and the Kallikaks? Whatever good might come from his constructive suggestions is outweighed by the mischief of a pseudo-scientific basis for evading or distorting our social responsibilities; too many people will seize any excuse for these purposes. The plain fact is that we do not know the answers to his provocative questions, and in our present-day context it falls between mischief and malice to make such a prejudgment in his terms.

There is also a common fallacy about genetic defect—that it is fundamentally irremediable. The whole concept of "bad heredity" is in any case a myopic one, since the high values of one social milieu are the vices of another one, and our milieu is constantly changing. The quantitative importance of hereditary variation for our social problems is, we repeat, quite unknown, nor will it be as easy as Professor Shockley implies to find out. As long as any racial prejudice or prejudgment lingers, would a Negro child adopted into a white family have the same effective environment as a white baby? Howbeit we can be sure of two things: (1) that under any circumstances the rate of genetic change of the population is very slow compared to the changes in our social institutions, and (2) even if we adopted a totalitarian answer on Shockley's premises, there would be plenty of residual variability to contend with. In these circumstances we can hardly neglect another prescription that Shockley overlooks—to work out the techniques of medical care, education and industrial and economic organization that can create incentives and useful careers for the whole wonderful variety of human beings.

The Faculty of the Department of Genetics

Walter F. Bodmer
A. T. Ganesan
L. A. Herzenberg
Joshua Lederberg
(Executive Head)
Elliott C. Levinthal
Eric M. Shooter
Silvio Varon

Stanford M.D Oct 1966 5(2):41