



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Department of Mental Health

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MALCOLM J. FARRELL, M.D.
SUPERINTENDENT

WALTER E. FERNALD STATE SCHOOL

BOX C, WAVERLEY 78, MASS.

March 31, 1964

Dr. Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics
Stanford University School of Medicine
Stanford Medical Center
300 Pasteur Drive
Palo Alto, California

Dear Dr. Lederberg:

Thank you very much for your letter of January 7th. I am sorry that I had no time or opportunity to respond in detail to your comments.

You are perfectly right in your warning that any article like ours which stresses the social disorganization creates the dangerous assumption that the problem of mental retardation of the mild form is merely a sociocultural problem. I am well aware that the endowment in regard to intelligence is a very important factor and that the mildly retarded are people who haven't got what the highly endowed, highly intelligent people have. It is also true that this difference in mental constitution, in the last analysis, is also a matter of "genetics" and interaction with the environment.

I feel, however, that the use of the term "genetics" in relation to what happens here is misleading since in this case endowment means something very different from genetics applied, for instance, to metabolic disorders in which we actually deal with a genetic deficiency. I wish that the geneticists would offer us a term which would make it possible to distinguish between inherited intelligence and intelligence defects, because so many people have felt and still feel that the problem of mild mental retardation is just a matter of genetics, too, and that little can be done about the poorly endowed ones. While I am aware of how useful the term "intelligence" is in relation to sociocultural achievements, I am getting more and more doubtful as to what we are actually dealing with in those people who are poorly endowed in our culture. They probably would get away with it in a different culture; and in Russia this group of people are not such a serious problem as in America. But what is the point in which they are failing?

Sincerely yours,

Clemens E. Benda, M.D.
Clemens E. Benda, M.D.

CEB/dg

Benda