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THE OTHER INFECTIOUS DISEASE
OR
A PLEA FOR A NEW HOSPITAL.

By C. IRVING FISHER, M.D.,

SUPERINTENDENT OF STATE ALMSHOUSE, TEWKSBURY, MASS.

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THE OTHER INFECTIOUS DISEASE: A PLEA FOR A NEW HOSPITAL.

BY C. IRVING FISHER, M.D.,

CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE, STATE ALMSHOUSE, TEWKSBURY, MASS.

The hospital is one of the highest and noblest achievements of Christian charity. It sets aside all questions of race, color, morals, or deserts, and considers the human body in sickness and pain, whether from injury or disease. It gathers to itself the best medical and surgical skill, the most approved modern appliances, and becomes the convenience of the wealthy in their hour of need, while it gives to the unfortunate dependent and stranger an equal chance with his more prosperous neighbor. Its benefits are not to its patients alone. They reach and bless every home into which the physician goes; for the wards open to the medical student have made practical and intelligent the teaching of the school, and trained nurses are here provided to second his efforts in behalf of the sick and suffering in all stations of life.

To the mature physician and surgeon is thus opened a field of observation and study such as is not to be found in any private practice. It constantly brings before the eye and puts upon record all the characteristics and modifications of disease. It affords the best opportunity for the application and observation of new methods of treatment; and thus, through a larger and surer knowledge of disease and its remedy, it becomes a direct agent in the improvement of the race.

It is not the purpose of this paper to consider the general or the insane hospitals, with which you are all familiar, but to present a plea for a new departure by the State in the direction of self-protection, by the recognition of a disease which, now concealed and ignored, is



nevertheless sowing seeds of physical and mental weakness, from which she is already reaping a large harvest of pauperism.

Our present social and civil laws make and perpetuate dependents. In saying this, I do not call in question the benevolent intent of our law-makers or leaders of social thought. My point of observation has been for a term of years in the State Almshouse of Massachusetts, whose constant population averages nearly one thousand people, while it admits and discharges more than two thousand annually. They belong chiefly to the dissolute and intemperate classes, and most of them are found on admission to be hospital subjects. After remaining for a season, they are either discharged or become a part of our permanent population. Those who remain are largely persons whose life of reckless debauchery has borne its legitimate fruit, in exhausted vitality and seated disease, mental or physical.

Those who go are of the same sort. They have been nourished and nursed at the expense of the State, and are then set free to return to their revellings, to contaminate others, and to propagate their kind, till nature again succumbs, and they return once more to be treated to the best the State can provide until sufficiently restored to go forth again. At length, they, too, return to end their days in the protecting arms of the State at this or some other of her fostering institutions, whose kindly care lengthens out for them the worse than useless span of life. Add to this the unlimited freedom with which we allow the overcrowded countries of Europe to pour in their dregs upon us, and let me repeat again my former statement, which might at first thought have seemed overbold,—“Our present social and civil laws make and perpetuate dependents.”

The hospital is rapidly becoming a more and more important factor in the care of these people. Its aim should be, not only to help the individual by giving shelter, relieving suffering, and curing disease, but still more to protect the public from possible infection, while making the period of dependency as short as is consistent with this end. Already those diseases which come as epidemics are recognized by local governments, and every precaution is taken to prevent their spread. The State already takes persons rendered incapable through mental diseases into its custody, and keeps its control of them for life, unless they recover. Already some of our States are planning hospitals for inebriates, where, by patient care and restraint through a term of years, if need be, they may be weaned from the cup which has enslaved them.

There is yet a disease which is infectious, which exists in every

community, which is carried as a taint in the blood, and may appear after long lying dormant, which may be transmitted by inheritance, which, while existing mostly among the low and dissolute, is by no means confined to that class. It is refused by most hospitals; and many large cities afford no place where persons suffering with venereal diseases can be treated, outside a pauper or criminal institution. Though carefully concealed, it is yet so common that every issue of our daily papers contains advertisements of remedies and promises of cure by so-called doctors, couched in language blind and vague, yet well understood by the initiated. It is associated chiefly with shame and dishonor, and may not so much as be mentioned in polite society; yet I conceive that this platform is pre-eminently the place where this "pestilence that walketh in darkness," this "destruction that wasteth at noon-day," which so ruthlessly touches the purity and the very life of our land, may and should be openly discussed, if, by any means, its vile contamination might be checked or held in control.

Pauperism indicates weakness, and whatever tends to reduce the physical condition below the normal standard tends to pauperism in those of weak will and dissolute inheritance. Next to intemperance, I hold that syphilis is the most important factor in the development and perpetuation of the dependent classes. There is not a tissue of the body which is exempt from its subtle and undermining influence. It renders the system more liable to other diseases, behind which it hides itself as under a mask; while the physician, led astray by its subtlety, treats the apparent symptoms, and fails to discover the insidious poison which is sapping the life of his patient.

Insane persons received by us as chronic cases, especially the demented and the epileptics, are frequently found to be syphilitic, and, when treated on this basis, show great improvement and even recover. I am confident that there are to-day large numbers in the hospitals of our land under treatment for other diseases who would show this taint if carefully examined, and who would improve to a condition above dependence if treated with this in view.

But, while all vestige of venereal trouble may disappear in the individual, the community is not yet rid of it. Let the person become a parent, and the disease may reappear as a blight upon the babe in its mother's arms, or to curse its later life with weakened intellect or epileptic convulsions. Pitiable, indeed, are these weak and sickly offspring of poisoned human bodies; and we can but cheerfully acquiesce in the interposition of Divine Providence when

it removes them from our sight and care while the unequal struggle for existence has but just begun.

A case in illustration taken from the records of private practice may be given, showing the subtle nature and far-reaching influence of this disease. The patient was a man of seventy years, an honored and respected citizen, having, to all appearance, a sound mind in a healthy body. He was the father of seven children, two of whom were cripples; while other evidences of congenital syphilis showed in the remaining five. Four grandchildren also were defective. The sickness to which the physician was called was of a trivial nature, the mysterious feature being that the patient did not rally as men usually do. A careful examination was made to find the cause, and evidences of syphilis were discovered. The family physician could hardly believe his own diagnosis, and sought older counsel, who confirmed his opinion. The patient, questioned, admitted that he had the disease when a young man; "but," said he, "I thought that was cured forty years ago." A larger knowledge of this case convinced both patient and physician, that the physical and mental defects in both children and grandchildren were due to this cause alone.

Most of those admitted to our State hospital at Tewksbury show traces of syphilis, either inherited or acquired. Many of the children born there show unmistakable evidence of the disease, which was not present in the mother, and which shows all too surely the character of those who beget illegitimate children. And yet this disease, which in some of its manifestations is more loathsome than small-pox, which is as destructive and, under certain conditions, as infectious as leprosy, which by vile persons is voluntarily contracted and communicated, which probably causes, directly and indirectly, more deaths annually than all the epidemics which visit our land, is not recognized in the statute-book. It does not appear as the cause of death upon the physician's certificate or books of statistics, because the practitioner does not always recognize it, or because, out of kindly consideration for the friends of the deceased, he writes instead the name of the complicating trouble. "Rheumatism is written over the graves of strong men crippled in their prime,— 'scrofula' hides the secret sin of the parent stamped on the slender frame of the invalid child,— 'cancer' is the foul lie buried with the wife who has silently suffered a life of the most excruciating agony which human flesh can endure."* Nor is the public protected by the temporary withdrawal which it sometimes seeks, because no place has been provided for it.

* See foot-note on p. 7.

I would urge the establishment of wards in every municipal and State hospital, and in some private ones also, where all forms of venereal disease may be admitted. In some cities, a special hospital might be established. Our friends of the Cancer Hospital in New York, I have been told, sometimes feel that the name which they have adopted, and which so clearly expresses the character of that noble charity, is not a wise one. People do not like by their acts to acknowledge to themselves or their friends that they have a loathsome or incurable disease. Much less will patients care to enter an institution the name of which implies shame and dishonor. So the ward or hospital here proposed will need a name more honorable than that which would specify its real work. Perhaps "Hospital for Skin Diseases," or some similar term, would be sufficiently expressive.

It is made obligatory on the part of physicians to report to the proper civil authorities the existence in their practice of such contagious diseases as small-pox, yellow fever, scarlet fever, etc. These maladies are in no way associated with dishonor or impurity. They may wipe out their victims from the face of the earth, but they leave no taint to be transmitted to descendants. If the State thus guards its citizens from these lesser scourges, why should it not extend its protecting power to a disease which affects not only the present, but future generations, and which is developed and perpetuated by the voluntary violation of both Divine and civil law?

Does it not seem strange that, while we have made laws to preserve the chastity of the community, no attempt whatever has yet been made to secure us from disease which by violation of these laws is scattered broadcast over our land? "Grant that the individual may play what havoc he chooses with himself and his happiness, society has the right to demand that self-indulgence shall bring no evil to a single other being than the transgressor; and hereafter it will look to the Public Health Officer to close up the avenues of disease which lead from this as from every other centre of violated rightful living."* I urge that there should be some legislation looking to the State control of those who have venereal diseases in the infectious stages.

I am aware that there are many difficulties in the way. Laws for the pauper and criminal usually find passage through a legislative body; but a law which may touch the pleasure of some who indulge in crime behind the screen of wealth and respectability, a law which

* See foot-note on p. 7.

may put to shame some in places of influence, by bringing their secret sins to the light of day, a law which in its execution may bow with grief worthy families, because some honored and esteemed one is shown to be untrue and impure,— this is not easy of enactment.

But this at least might be secured: that persons who have come under State control,— whether by laying themselves liable to law they have become inmates of some penal institution, or have thrown themselves temporarily upon the State's bounty for support,— if found to have venereal diseases, shall not be allowed to go out until the infectious stages are passed.

This cannot be done without legal authority. Patients under treatment and subjected to the regular life and habits of an institution soon begin to feel well, and are anxious to return to a life of liberty; and the authorities in charge, not appreciating the medical aspect of the case, and not willing to appear to harbor able-bodied men and women at the State's expense, are quite willing to be rid of dissolute inmates chafing under restraint. So they go out to neglect themselves, yield to their passionate desires, and infect others who, it may be, are innocent of wrong-doing. In illustration, I have known a young woman having the initial lesion of syphilis to go out from an institution and be married to a respectable man within three weeks, he being ignorant that any trouble existed. Again: a woman was under sentence in one of our State Prisons. She was young, with a pretty face and pleasant manners. She attracted the notice and won the confidence of certain visitors. They interested themselves in her behalf. They could not see what the physician saw, the vile taint concealed beneath a fair exterior. Mistaken philanthropy prevailed, and the woman was pardoned and released,— virtually, though not nominally, on the ground of good looks. She went out, and in a few weeks had communicated her disease to eleven persons.

Within a month, I have received a letter from a friend residing midway between the Atlantic and Pacific, asking for suggestions in behalf of a young man to whom kind friends earnestly desire to extend a helping hand. Born of good family, with fair inheritance, in early youth he was led into vices and blighted with loss of moral virtue and physical taint. Greater maturity has brought to him a period of thoughtfulness and a desire to reform. But with moral restoration he needs also healing for his sick body. Friends stand ready to advise and encourage, and are anxiously asking, Where can he go? Is there no hospital or asylum to which he may retire, where, in care of skilled physicians, health may be regained and the

man become physically fit for useful activity among men? But they ask in vain ; for no such door is open.

Do you wonder that we who live within sight and knowledge of these things feel a thrill of alarm when we consider the future of our country and the rapidly increasing number of her dissolute and defective classes? There is perhaps this consoling aspect of the subject. Its seeds of corruption are also the seeds of death. A race thus poisoned must soon run itself out from exhausted vitality ; but meanwhile the innocent suffer with the guilty, and the pure are being dragged down to swell the ranks of impurity. "It is folly to exterminate diphtheria, small-pox, and typhus, and let syphilis, the most prolific mother of evil of them all, send forth her brood of whelps to be the cause of more bodily and mental misery than all other shapes of human error combined."*

These facts, however unpleasant, are facts none the less ; and this disease must sooner or later receive the recognition which all other serious infectious diseases have received. The State will yet put its restraining hand upon the dissolute and vile, and exercise its legitimate power to preserve inviolate the manhood and womanhood of its citizens.

* The foregoing quotations are from the address entitled "Protection from Venereal Diseases," by Dr. Albert H. Gihon, Medical Director U. S. N., before the American Public Health Association at Nashville, Tenn., in 1879.

