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TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF

TUBERCULOSIS?

Read at the Meeting of the American Climatological Association
at Washington, May 30, 1894.

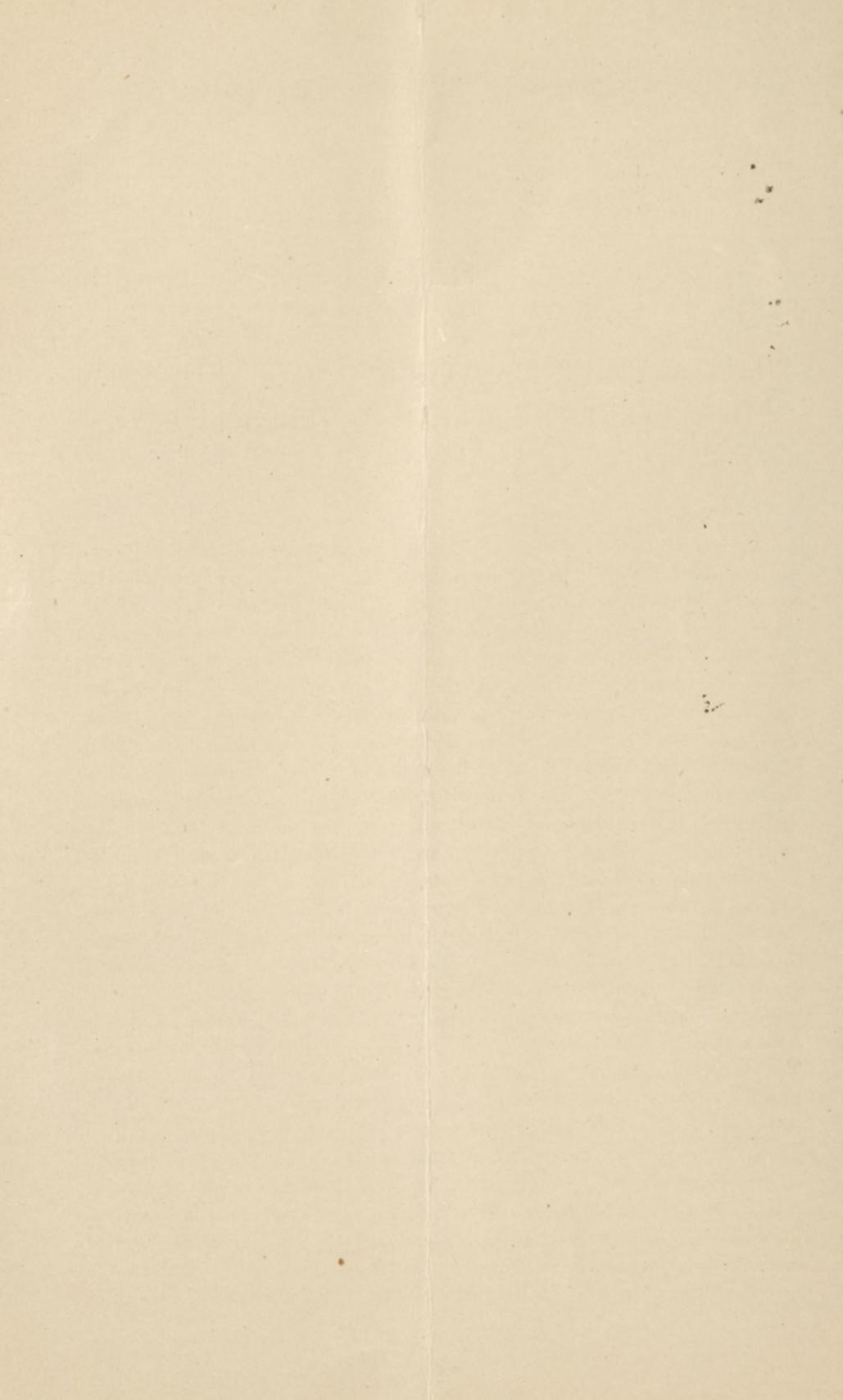
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SHALL ANYTHING BE DONE BY LEGAL AUTHORITY TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF TUBERCULOSIS ?

It is now twelve years since the infectious nature of tuberculosis, at various times before suspected or believed, was put beyond question, and yet very little has been done in this country to prevent its spread. Physicians recently graduated, and a few older ones who have kept themselves informed of progress in medicine, have enjoined care in the disposal of the sputa, and recently a few have had bulletins of information printed for the use of the sick, or those exposed to them, or both, notably the Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Tuberculosis, and Dr. De Lancey Rochester, of Buffalo, New York. In 1889 the Board of Health of New York City issued circulars, which were widely distributed, setting forth the communicability of tuberculosis and measures for its prevention. In 1893 the American Public Health Association and the Public Health section of the Pan-American Medical Congress adopted resolutions in favor of the reporting and registration of all cases of tuberculosis. In September of last year the State Board of Health of Michigan resolved that "hereafter, consumption (and other diseases due to the bacillus tuberculosis) shall be included in the official list of 'Diseases dangerous to the public health,' requiring notice by householders and physicians to the local health officer as soon as such a disease is recognized." "The purpose of this resolution," as explained by the secretary of the board, "is to secure to the local health authorities and to the State board of health information of the location of each case of well-developed consumption; with the view of placing in the hands of the patient reliable information how to avoid re-infecting himself or herself, and how to avoid giving the disease to others; with the view of placing in the hands of the patient's family, or others most endangered, information how to avoid contracting consumption; also with the view of instructing superintendents of public buildings how best to restrict the spread of the disease." In February of this year the Board of Health of

New York City took similar action, but the regulation is not quite so stringent. The circular declares that "the [health] department will hereafter register the name, address, sex, and age of every person suffering from tuberculosis in this city, so far as such information can be obtained, and respectfully requests that hereafter all physicians forward such information on the postal cards ordinarily employed for reporting cases of contagious disease. This information will be solely for the use of the department, nor will the department assume any sanitary surveillance of such patients, unless the patient resides in a tenement-house, boarding-house, or hotel, or unless the attending physician requests that an inspection of the premises be made; and in no case where the person resides in a tenement-house, boarding-house, or hotel will any action be taken if the physician requests that no visits be made by inspectors, and is willing himself to deliver circulars of information, or furnish such equivalent information as is required to prevent the communication of the disease to others." The resolution provides for the official visitation of tenement-houses, boarding-houses, and hotels where cases of tuberculosis are known to exist, unless the attending physician has assumed the responsibility as above stated. In all cases where it comes to the knowledge of the department that premises which have been occupied by a consumptive have been vacated by death or removal, an inspector will visit the premises and direct proper disinfection. Rugs, carpets, bedding, etc., are sent away and disinfected without charge. No other persons than those residing there at the time will be allowed to occupy the premises till the order of the board has been complied with. The order also provides for free bacteriological examinations, and that all cases in public institutions shall be reported.

The College of Physicians in Philadelphia held a special meeting in January of this year to consider the proposed act of the board of health of that city in reference to the registration of tuberculosis. After a long discussion participated in by a number of the prominent members of the College, the resolution of Dr. Flick, looking to the registration and disinfection of houses which have been infected by tuberculosis, and recommending the establishment of a municipal hospital for the treatment of the disease, was rejected, and the following resolutions offered by the council of the College were passed:

Resolved, That the College of Physicians believes that the attempt to register consumptives and to treat them as the subjects of contagious disease would be adding hardships to the lives of those unfortunates, stamping them as the outcasts of society. In view of the chronic character of the malady, it could not lead to any measures of real value not otherwise attainable.

"That strict attention on the part of physicians in charge of the individual cases, insisting on the disinfection of the sputum and of the rooms, on adequate ventilation, and on the separation of the sick from the well as far as possible, will meet the requirements of the situation so far as they

practically can be met, and better than any rules that, for diseases so chronic, can be carried out by a board of health.

"That the College of Physicians respectfully requests that no official action be taken in the matter by the board of health, except the insisting on the disinfection of rooms in which consumptives have lived and died, in instances in which such procedure is not likely to have been adopted under the direction of the attending physician."

During the past winter a committee was appointed by the chairman of the Section on Clinical Medicine, Pathology, and Hygiene, of the Massachusetts Medical Society, of which committee I had the honor to be chairman, to consider what means could be adopted to prevent the spread of tuberculosis in our State. The members of this committee felt that it would be unwise to attempt too much at first, but that the time had certainly come for some kind of an entering-wedge, which could be driven deeper as circumstances and the temper of the people seemed to warrant or demand. So we decided to respectfully request the State board of health to consider the propriety of issuing a circular declaring the infectious nature of the disease, that the chief danger was from the sputum, and how to take care of this, copies of this circular to be distributed in large numbers to the physicians of the State, and by them placed in the hands of every family where a case of tuberculosis was known to exist. The committee also took the opportunity of expressing their opinion of the desirability of isolating tuberculous patients in hospitals, and the ultimate erection of special hospitals for them. The board of health acceded very willingly to the wishes of the committee, and have issued a bulletin setting forth the prevalence of the disease, its nature and mode of prevention, and also a small leaflet of information, which they suggest local boards of health to issue for the use of the patient and his family.

This is about all that has been done. How can this apparent indifference to the most fatal disease in the world be accounted for? Is it that there lingers any doubt about the infectiousness of the disease? I think not on the part of any one who has looked at the evidence of it. Though every one might not admit that every case came from a previous case, he would not in the face of the evidence deny such a possibility. It is hard, in the wide-spread prevalence of the disease, to get convincing clinical substantiation of what has been so abundantly proved experimentally. The experience of the nurses at Brompton Hospital is quoted over and over again to prove that the attendants of consumptives have no special liability to contract the disease. The statistics are certainly remarkable, but equally so on the other side are the statistics of Cornet, who examined the records of thirty-eight nursing societies for twenty-five years, examining the causes of over four thousand deaths, and found that over sixty-two per cent. died from tuberculosis. It seems to me that it is to the magnitude of the case that one must look for the cause of the hesitation in grappling

with it. The disease is not only wide-spread, but pursues such a long course that a satisfactory treatment of it (such as we would give a short, acute infectious disease) seems out of the question.

It stands to reason, however, that the State, if it is to take any interest in the health of its people, must not ignore the infectious nature of tuberculosis because it cannot do all it would, but must begin at once, and do what it can to limit its spread.

Let us consider for a moment what the State can do at once:

1. It can proclaim the infectious nature of the disease, assuring the people that, inasmuch as the chief danger is from the sputum, if that be destroyed they need have little fear. It can inform them of the best methods of disposal of the sputum, and urge that all sputum in consumptives' houses, and in public buildings, be so cared for. By this alone probably thousands of lives will be saved. Knowing the danger, people will devise new plans of avoidance for themselves and thus benefit the State.

Surely our people do not wish to be kept in ignorance, but have established boards of health to keep them informed of and protected against danger to their health, as far as possible, and if they find that the authorities have been remiss in this great matter they may not feel in a liberal mood when asked for future appropriations and concessions. If the proclamation of the nature of this disease had been longer pressed in its true light in the State of New York, I doubt if a tuberculous herd of cattle would have been recently released for want of funds to dispose of it.

2. The State can use the weight of its authority and recommendation for the establishment of special hospitals, whither thousands, who are now a burden at home, or improperly cared for at almshouse hospitals, are willing and anxious to go. The class of patients which would voluntarily enter the hospital is just the class which, out of the hospital, is most conducive to the spread of the disease. It includes those who are too sick to work, and often too sick to care for themselves personally, and who fall back upon their friends, who are unable to provide for them except by sharing their already overcrowded lodgings, and overtaxing themselves in such a way as to make them easy victims to contagion. That we cannot isolate all affected subjects is no reason why we should not isolate a part, especially when those left in the community will be those most willing and most able to take care of themselves.

Other methods of combating the disease will come naturally, and be demanded by the people when once they appreciate the gravity of the situation.

Whether our boards of health should at once require notification of cases is a question about which opinions will differ. The object of notification, of course, is to insure that from the first every case is surrounded by every known safeguard by one competent and interested to do so. The objection to it has been, first, that it would unnecessarily alarm the patient himself, and, secondly, that it would so alarm the family and friends that

they would treat him as an outcast. In regard to the first objection it will, I think, be admitted by those familiar with the treatment of these cases of tuberculosis that those patients have always done best who have been apprised of the gravity of their condition, especially when this was done early. The late Dr. Henry Bennet, of Mentone, insisted upon this, and then encouraged his patients to make a hard, intelligent fight. In regard to the second objection, that it would create a panic among the relatives and friends, I do not think this need be seriously considered, if they are told that the careful following of the rules laid down will remove danger almost wholly. Leaving the whole matter in the hands of the family doctor, both in regard to the amount of information to be given and what precautions shall be taken, cannot be as efficacious as if this was done by an officer of the board of health. Unless the family physician thoroughly believed and was personally interested, it would not be properly done.

It seems unnecessary and unwise to attempt too much at first. It is not necessary in the beginning to even mention all the minor sources of infection, but there is no doubt the State must soon attempt the destruction of tuberculous cattle, for though meat, being usually cooked, is not a great source of danger, milk certainly is.

This Association was founded for the study of climatology and the diseases of the respiratory and circulatory systems. We have more to do with tuberculosis than any other association. We all know that something ought to be done to give the people the benefit of modern research, and it is our duty to so recommend. Therefore I shall propose in the business meeting a resolution calling upon all boards of health to issue bulletins of instruction in regard to the nature of tuberculosis, and the best methods of combating the chief sources of its dissemination, hoping and believing that this will prove an easy entering-wedge to more thorough and effectual means of controlling this most destructive disease.¹

¹ At the business meeting on the day following the reading of this paper, the Association unanimously passed the following preamble and resolution:

"WHEREAS, The American Climatological Association was founded, among other objects, to promote the study of the nature and treatment of diseases of the respiratory organs, and

"WHEREAS, Tuberculosis is the most fatal cause of such diseases, and

"WHEREAS, Modern research has placed this disease among the communicable, and hence, to some extent at least, among the preventable diseases,

"Resolved, That this Association do strongly recommend the medical profession of this country to promote measures tending to its prevention."

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BY

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