



OFFICE OF
MEDICAL OFFICER IN CHARGE

Palermo

TREASURY DEPARTMENT

UNITED STATES
PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE
American Consulate,
Palermo, Italy.

Sept. 6, 1930

Senior Surgeon Lawrence Kolb,
U.S. Public Health Service,
American Consulate General,
Dublin, Irish Free State.

Dear Doctor Kolb:

Last May I received a letter from you regarding our mental certificates here at Palermo. I have delayed answering it until I could get a better idea of what might be expected of our applicants.

In the past there seems to have been no definite standard set with which to compare our results obtained in mental testing. There were other factors also which made it advisable to proceed with caution. A great deal, perhaps too much, was left to the judgment of the examiner. In looking over the records here I found that the percentage of mental certificates had remained fairly constant since the station was opened. I assume, therefore, that my predecessors had the same difficulties that I have had. Shortly after I came here I wrote to Dr. Townsend requesting information regarding his methods and he sent me a copy of the form used in Naples. I had copies made and started using it. There still remained, however, the doubt as to what standard to go by. Your letter cleared this point to a considerable extent.

Practically all applicants I have tested here have been unable to read or write. It has been my experience that those tested fail quite constantly on certain tests.

Nearly one hundred percent of those tested failed to repeat digits backward. They have been unable to understand what is wanted. In many cases it has been necessary to give repeated examples to put the idea across.

Very few have been able to copy the diamond although they copy the square satisfactorily. In some cases the applicant has claimed never to have had a pencil in his hand before.

The pocketbook and field test is a total loss. I have found it nearly impossible to make the applicant understand the problem.

Applicants have usually failed to give the difference between objects with which they are familiar.

I mention these difficulties because the question has arisen in my mind as to whether these tests are of any value when applied to this type of applicant. As you know many of these people are extremely ignorant and live their lives in a very narrow sphere. This is particularly true of the women.

Some of the applicants will add and subtract, repeat three or four digits forward and not do too badly on the Ferguson boards, Healy A and B, Gwyn triangle, but fail when given the tests mentioned above. This tendency, of course, brings the average down considerably.

I have judged, in some cases, that failure to draw the diamond might have been the result of an inability to handle the pen or pencil particularly, if an illiterate was being tested.

I am not sure that failure to comprehend the pocketbook and field test and the problem of repeating digits backward is not due to a difference in general mental attitude from ours. My association with the better class of Sicilians and Italians has led me to conclude that there is quite a difference. Their reactions to remarks and questions are very different from those expected. If this is true, what may we hope for in the case of the peasant class.

Sicily, it appears to me, presents a special problem and I am sorry that we could not have had routine mental examinations made here so that we might compare them with the rest of Italy. I regret that I am unable to give more time to the work. We are handicapped by the lack of time, and, to a certain extent, by the difference in language. Our applicants come in droves just before a ship sails and so at the time when we have the greatest opportunity to weed out the defectives we have the least time in which to do so. Practically all our applicants speak Sicilian and Italian is not understood by some of them. The inspectress in my office speaks Italian and she has difficulty in some cases making herself understood. The question of time is the most important problem. I am trying to get around the second obstacle by having the questions translated into both Italian and Sicilian. In the States we ask our questions and give directions always in the same way for the sake of uniformity. That does not work here, for these people never say anything without doing so in the most difficult and round about manner. It is very probable, therefore, that more than one way of asking a question or giving

directions must be permitted as well as repetition of

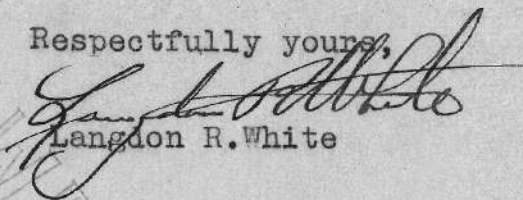
the same.

I share the sentiments expressed in your letter. It has always been my policy to give the United States the benefit of the doubt. It seems to me at present that much depends on the judgment of the examiner. Our judgment is often questioned as you know. It is the slightly defective case which gives us the trouble.

I was very sorry that you left Naples before I went there as I had planned to talk the work over with you. In all probability you would find it profitable to take a trip to Palermo when you can do so.

With kindest regards, I am,

Respectfully yours,


Langdon R. White

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