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Address.

THE DUTY OF THE HEALTH DEPARTMENTS IN THE ALCOHOL QUESTION.

By HAVEN EMERSON, M.D., NEW YORK,

Health Commissioner of New York City.

THE state laws under which health boards or departments of health operate in most cases allow very general powers and broad jurisdiction over all matters affecting the health of the community. Any such delegation of authority to a small body of experts for the protection of all the people imposes by the same act proportionate responsibilities.

The community looks to its elected and appointed, salaried servants to protect the whole against the results of thoughtlessness, ignorance or malice of any individuals or groups, even at the cost of restraining personal liberty or appropriation of property. Not only is a high death rate quite properly a reflection upon the administration of local government and a gauge of the intelligence and social standards of a city or state, but it brings with it certain, though not generally observed, commercial disadvantages and burdens expressed in an increasing tax rate.

Similarly, certain types of disease are accepted as indices of a community's success in obtaining social justice and the advantages of a gregarious manner of life. The incidence of typhoid fever, the presence of rabies or smallpox, the tuberculosis sick rate and death rate,

the infant mortality rate, are looked upon as truer measures of civilization than the number of churches, banks or libraries in a town. The economies of civil government require the saving of lives and the prevention of sickness to be accomplished at the minimum of expense.

The bookkeeping of public health administration demands two kinds of balance sheets, one kept by the statistician, the registrar of morbidity and mortality, the running account with sickness and death, the other the financial statement to the taxpayers, expressing in analytical form the end product of per capita cost stated in terms of community health. To do this honestly, the health officer must point out to the taxpayer what kinds of disease can be controlled by exercise of the police power of the State, and what disorders and disabilities and deaths can be diminished only by the voluntary acts or agreements of the individuals concerned. We have a fairly logical division of diseases into three classes from the sanitarian's point of view.

First in importance, up to the present time, have been the communicable diseases. The elimination of these has been the object of health officers throughout the world, and a cursory glance at the results will show that the disappearance of many and the great reduction of all has followed the discovery of the specific cause of the disease in a few instances, the method of transmission in many, and in several instances of a specific preventive or curative therapy. The technic of control of this class of diseases amounts almost to an exact science.

The second group are the diseases of occu-

pation,—the poisonings, the effects of dusts, the disturbances of health due to unsanitary environment of working places. Poisoning by phosphorus, lead, acids, the dusts of animal and vegetable products, are well recognized, and admirable results have followed intelligent application of suitable preventive measures. Education and tactful enforcement must combine to accomplish results.

The third group includes the disorders of development and function resulting from people's habits in their home or personal life, their habits of housing, eating, clothing, exercise, recreation. As can be readily seen, this last group is hardly amenable to other than educational treatment, for however exacting the building and labor laws, an uninstructed populace can bring about unsanitary and unhygienic conditions in excellent buildings and under generous conditions of employment.

Among the habits which bring individuals and communities to harm is the habitual use and abuse of alcohol. Its use is almost always a habit, and a harmful one, and its abuse invariably leads to rapid mental and physical degeneration. Section 1169 of the Charter of the City of New York specifies among the other duties of the Board of Health the following:

"The Board of Health shall use all reasonable means for ascertaining the existence and cause of disease as peril to life or health and for averting the same throughout the city, and shall promptly cause all proper information in possession of said board to be sent to the local health authorities of any city, village or town in this State which may request the same, and shall add these to such useful suggestions as the experience of said board may supply."

Section 181 of the Sanitary Code states that:

"No person shall knowingly or carelessly or negligently do or contribute to the doing of any act dangerous to the life or detrimental to the health of any human being, nor shall any person omit to do any reasonable and proper act or take any reasonable or proper precaution to protect human life and health."

What more authority or direction is required to oblige the Department of Health of New York City to collect facts as to the cause of any disease, to state the results publicly, and use all means to warn and protect the people against their danger?

What are the facts? The deaths from the epidemic of infectious colds, improperly called an epidemic of grippe, during the winter of 1916, resulted in 2000 deaths and probably was responsible for ten times as many serious cases of sickness. This epidemic aroused widespread interest, and was the subject of much discussion and attempts at education of the public by

the Health Department of New York and other cities.

From the records of the Department of Health of the City of New York it appears that there are annually at least two thousand deaths admittedly due to the excessive use of alcohol. It is a matter of record that eight thousand cases of acute alcoholism are treated annually at Bellevue Hospital, New York. Anybody familiar with general medical practice or the service in the general medical wards in any hospital in the large cities of this country, where the use of alcohol is common in our large cities, will be willing to testify to the very considerable, if not determining rôle that alcoholic habit plays in the course and termination of a large proportion of the diseases which come under observation.

Is this not sufficient to justify the use of such powers as the Board of Health has to prevent the use of alcohol in the community?

Alcohol, a consistently depressing, habit-forming drug, causes characteristic easily recognized diseases of the brain, nerves and special senses. Alcohol causes definite damage to the heart, kidneys, blood vessels and organs of digestion, especially the stomach and liver. When alcohol is used so moderately as to cause none of the special diseases due solely to its effects, it is known to damage the unborn babe, the nursing child and the grown man and woman in such ways as to render them peculiarly susceptible to the infectious and communicable diseases to which all people are exposed.

Certain types of permanent damage to mentality, and various psychical disorders in children, are accepted results of the use of alcohol in parents.

Alcohol can be used as a food, but at a cost both economical and physiological, which causes bankruptcy of pocket and health. In a few diseased conditions it has been found useful, but not indispensable.

Alcohol is a protoplasmic poison, like ether and chloroform, with slower but more enduring effect.

Alcohol has the physiological effect of gradual anesthesia acting upon the powers of perception, judgment, self-control, reasoning and intelligence until the human being is gradually stripped of all capacity for conscious direction, and becomes a reflex animal responding automatically and without choice to gross external physical stimuli.

The weary human, suffering from the misfortunes of his own creation or harrassed by the injustices of an artificial social order, turns for separation from his environment to the dullness and unrestraint which alcohol brings. Then is he not only unprepared for effective effort, competition or responsibility, but he is exposed particularly to the ever-ready infection, of which acute pneumonia is the most striking example.

These statements are not personal opinions. The world admits them and then says: "What then! Shall we give up this happy thoughtlessness for the chance at a bit longer and bit healthier life?" And up to the present time the answer has been all but unanimously "No."

It is as I conceive it the duty of health departments to change the answer. How? By the use of the police power of the State, that broad and powerful arm of law under which so much of the authority of Boards of Health has been exhibited? By legislation, that hope of democracy, the mythical voice of the people acting through their elected representatives? Or by education and example, the weapon of the teacher, the physician, the friend?

What the church has failed to do, the factory and the shop have undertaken. What laws and police repression have failed to effect, the spoken and written word can accomplish.

If a flagon of alcohol were offered to a student of pharmacology to test as a curiosity, and he applied the standard methods of physiological experiment to it, he could but come to the conclusion that he was dealing with a more dangerous chemical than any now available in the whole range of *materia medica*, not second to opium or its derivatives as a destroyer of character, a disturber of function and a degenerator of tissue, and he would be quite justified in advising the prohibition of its manufacture and use as a beverage.

Social custom and national habit have so sanctioned the use of this particularly anti-social drug that study, judgment and education have to win their case against a vast inertia.

Is the task harder than teaching the world that it may conquer tuberculosis, or the nations that they cannot live if they waste their baby life?

Is not the goal as splendid and shall our hopes be less than those of the crusaders against tuberculosis and the waste of child life, who have saved more lives annually than the armies are costing this very year in Europe?

It is, as I conceive it, the duty of health departments to teach, teach, teach, persuade, demonstrate, exhibit, exhort, prove that alcohol as a beverage, or in patent medicines is a menace to personal and community health, is a common source of sickness and death, is blocking the path of preventive medicine and is a danger to the physical and social development of the nation.

The Mayor of the City of New York has indicated his approval of the methods of the Department which have been used in combating insanitary conditions or harmful practices in the City of New York, and his annual address on May 2nd he spoke as follows:

"The basis of efficient public health work is public health education. As you are aware, the Department of Health is now, not only

through the public press and special bulletins but with coöperation of churches, local civic and other community organizations, carrying on day by day helpful educational work in public and personal hygiene. In this work the Department is not undertaking a crusade against the personal habits of the people of the City, but is calling attention in popular form to scientifically established facts which affect community health and personal efficiency."

Dr. Abbott of Waverley, Massachusetts, a recognized authority in insanity, has recently stated in the *BOSTON MEDICAL AND SURGICAL JOURNAL* in an article on "Preventable Forms of Mental Diseases," that the most important of the toxic psychoses and brain diseases are the alcoholic.

"Alcohol insanity is a wholly preventable psychosis. One eighth of all admissions to hospitals for insane are due directly to this cause, and an indefinite number of other psychoses, of which alcohol is an important contributing factor." "Movements which seek to educate the public as to exact facts, without prejudice, exaggeration, or sentiment, are the best." "An intelligent and educated public sentiment will support restrictive measures aimed at wholesale protection against evils of alcohol, by rigidly restricting the sale of that which causes them." "If everyone knew what the effects of alcohol really are, its internal use would almost be limited to the prescriptions of physicians."

Within the limits of this brief presentation it is impossible to avail myself of the mass of reliable and important contributions to the social and medical aspects of the use of alcohol. The employers of labor, the teachers of industrial efficiency, the workers among the poor, the physicians in Health Departments and in private practice very generally agree that alcohol causes a large amount of preventable disease, accident and disability, and that its use should be discontinued.

In closing I can but repeat my conviction that it is the duty of Health Departments to inaugurate and carry on by all available means, persistent campaigns of education, to the end that the community, which it is called upon to protect, may be in a position to judge for itself as an organized social group and as independent members, whether they are willing to ignore their own interest, their safety and their health by permitting the continued unlimited manufacture and sale of alcohol.

I venture to predict that no advance in the control of preventable disease of bacterial or infectious origin in the future, could accomplish such reduction of the morbidity and mortality of the community, as would undoubtedly follow the elimination of alcohol as a beverage.