SECTION OF STATE MEDICINE.

INFANTILE INSANITY.

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THE importance of studying the science and art of influence in the peculiarly impressionable epoch of infant life, during its many-sided rapid periods of evolution, has hitherto been practically disregarded.

Here, in our first lines of defence, it is not to the specialist we have to look for aids, and for solving difficulties. Moreover, at this very starting point of life leaders of thought— asylum doctors and hospital teachers—are not in daily touch with the groundwork of clinical domestic observations in the earliest months of existence. The family doctor alone is placed in the position for disciplining the faculties by his observed facts, and while engaged in this work, for the future culture of the world, he elevates those who carry out his directions in mental sanitation, practical life, knowledge, and truth. Besides, he holds the key to the family pedigree and ancestral history. His insight, extended experience, and close observations enable him, at this very early stage, before mental action and mentation are evolved, to control inherited conditions.

Practitioners who have so much in their power to make life physiological and real can prove by illustrations to the families of the earth that the lower elemental parts, out of gear in the first few months of life, can be raised out of automatism while ascending the rounds of the ladder, before the scholastic period.

Directive impressions conveyed to the infant for controlling, coercing, limiting, and encouraging to obedience, by well-timed laws, will tend to blot out aimless movements. To show that laws educate at the cradle side of life, correctional movements become more steady, and give signs that a mental advance has already commenced. But unless we persevere, in this our first encouragement, we cannot hope to be rewarded. Efforts, though tedious and wearying, will promote interest, as the non-rational inherited instincts begin to fade away. As growth advances complications we may expect, for slight physical ailments may call into action, especially when the body is not normal, mental predispositions. A nettle rash, a peripheral neuritis, as in herpes zoster, or a transient congestion, so common in a fatigued or growing brain, may excite changes in disposition which have again to be remedied.

Many children are deprived of the chance of not committing suicide later on, or spending some time in gaol, or their lives in a lunatic asylum, because the parents are kept in ignorance.

Let us safeguard the dangerous by casting them into the mould, and at the onset of existence deal with the whole being, while, with the assistance of the mother, we build up the sound elements, and the abnormal, which underlie the normal functions, will degenerate.

It should be sent forth to the world that those born with insane propensities can be made, by judicious training, not only able to take care of themselves, but good citizens, thereby proving to the world at large that heredity is not an unsurmountable barrier.

Through the want of practical knowledge and professional interest it is difficult to awaken those in power to this vital question, which so much concerns the nation at large. Hitherto our efforts have been unsuccessful, but since

Connolly's unanswerable arguments, which he sent forth so far back as 1862, facts have come out in a clearer light. And now, we hope, after so many years of effort, the Dublin School will make some practical move in formulating rules of guidance. May I be permitted to suggest that this Section call upon the Council of the Academy to take action in the framing of rules for the guidance of practitioners.

A comprehensive scheme, without undue elaboration, would, as far as my experience goes, be a valuable guide to the family doctor, whose advice would be readily realised and accepted by level-headed mothers against this appalling avoidable evil. Mothers, who, before doctors and nurses, are frequently the first to discover mental and physical infantile defects, are most willing to receive instructions for eradicating what they often feel would, very probably, end in lifelong regrets.

On the following grounds we ask for help:—

1st. Reformatory influences must commence at home.

2nd. That no rules have been framed, sent forth, and established for controlling the earliest forms of insanity at the onset of existence, and before the scholastic epoch.

3rd. That on preventive principles the earliest diagnosis of insanity in infantile life is of vital importance to the patient, the friends, the nation, and the tax-payer.

4th. That the sequent instances of three generations have declared by manifest examples that if, in the beginning of life, attention be paid to peculiarities in early infancy disordered states of the mental faculties can be remedied and blotted out, which if unchecked incur ruin, and bring a plague to the family and neighbourhood.

Though on former occasions I brought this subject before this Section and other medical meetings, and though my paper to-night may be looked upon as a mere recital or rehearsal of what I had already brought forward, yet the

question is of such vital importance that I feel it should not be allowed to drop.

We should never lose sight of the fact that the great object of civilisation is the happiness of the people. To quote our own historian, Lecky, who says, "Its foundation is laid in *pure domestic life*, in commercial integrity, in a high standard of moral worth, in public spirit, in simple habits, in courage, in uprightness, and a certain soundness and moderation of judgment, which springs quite as much from character as from intellect."

DR. CONOLLY NORMAN said he had listened in vain for any practical suggestion from Dr. Bernard. He had spoken with too much generality. A great deal was heard about "insane predisposition," and it should interest us all, for we all have it. It was a very short and obscure family which did not contain many lunatics. Dr. Bernard had employed another vague phrase, in constant use, and to which it was difficult to attach any definite meaning—"judicious training." We were told lately that a British youth leaving an university had about as much education as an eight year old German child. Which system was right?

DR. SYMES said feeble-minded children were very different from idiotic children, but he thought we did not distinguish between the two classes in this country. He thought many of those charged with such offences as causing fires, &c., suffered from some mental defect. In the homes for children to which he was physician he divided all the children into the following six classes:—(1) Ordinary normal children, in health; (2) children physically but not mentally defective; (3) defective and feeble-minded children incapable of attending school; (4) epileptic children; (5) blind and deaf children; (6) idiots and imbeciles.

DR. DAWSON agreed with Dr. Conolly Norman's remarks as to the excess to which the theory of heredity is carried nowadays. No doubt, in certain cases, there would be no difficulty in making out a neurotic heredity, and in these cases prophylaxis should be employed if possible. He (Dr. Dawson) thought Dr. Symes had missed the point of Dr. Bernard's paper. Dr. Bernard had referred to extreme early infancy.

DR. DOYLE thought self-control was the point needing greatest emphasis. He had seen very marked improvement effected in a case which had been sent to an institution in Holland where the patients are taken charge of by farmers, and where no education is attempted, the patients being chiefly employed in manual labour.

SIR FRANCIS CRUISE thought Dr. Bernard's paper one of great importance in directing attention to the mental condition and proper mental training of children. He had seen children of two and three years of age whose mental condition pointed to insanity, and who ultimately proved to be insane. He was strongly convinced that a great many children are insane.

DR. LITTLE hoped Dr. Bernard's paper was only a preface to a work on the subject. No advance would be made if they were content to deal with generalities. Undoubtedly, a great deal could be done in the training of children who had a tendency to grow up imbeciles. About fifteen years ago a boy came under his notice who was growing up an imbecile. He was sent to an institution near London, and is now an officer in the army.

SIR CHARLES CAMERON referred to the work being done by the London School Board in the training of children with impaired intellects. The children are examined by the Medical Officers of the Board, and special classes have been formed for the purpose of teaching those with mental defects.

DR. BERNARD, replying, said the perceptive faculties do not begin to dawn until the dentition period, and the infant could be ruled and controlled in the same way as an animal. The moment the child is born the doctor should ascertain if it is physically normal. Then the cry and the movements of the hands and legs should be watched. Certain rules of guidance should be laid down for the mother and nurse, and so the infant automaton could be taught to observe order.