ON THE STUDY OF ALCOHOLISM.*

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I. THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF THE ALCOHOL QUESTION.

THE Alcohol Question confronts us in every day's duties. It is fitting that at least once a year we, as medical practitioners, should review our relationship to this matter.

Alcoholism is a widely-prevalent and most serious evil. It is a pathological state with direct and indirect prejudicial influence which is far-reaching. It hinders individual development and hampers national progress. It hastens personal decadence and makes for racial deterioration.

The alcohol problem offers to all serious students of human affairs abundant material for investigation ; but it appeals particularly to members of our own profession, for, many-sided though it may be, it is essentially a subject concerned with personal and public health.

The causal factors of alcoholism are highly complex ; its clinical features are very varied ; the pathological manifestations differ widely ; and its prevention, arrest, and amelioration are surrounded by difficulties. Prejudice, apathy, and ignorance still continue to increase the perplexities of the situation.

For long, solitary workers have sought to unravel the intricacies of the alcohol problem. The methods of research have often been crude, and the manner of conducting reform manifestly unscientific.

• An address delivered at the Annual Temperance Breakfast, held in connection with the Oxford meeting of the British Medical Association, Thursday, July 28, 1904.

Recent years have witnessed a remarkable and almost spontaneous concentration of scientific observation on this subject. Long-surviving errors are being swept aside, many mere empirical procedures have been discarded, and a stultifying dogmatism is now generally discountenanced. In alcoholism we recognise a morbid condition which must be studied in accordance with the strict requirements of the best modern scientific methods. Already results rich in directing force have accrued.

II. THE PRACTICE OF THE PAST.

It is but fair to admit that much of present ignorance pertaining to the use of alcohol, both in health and disease, is the outcome of incomplete knowledge, erroneous teaching, and ill-advised practice in the past.

It was formerly believed that alcoholic beverages were desirable, and even necessary, *dietetic agents* for the healthy, and served also as useful *nutrients* for the diseased.

The custom of placing alcohol among the so-called stimulants instead of grouping it with what we now know as the narcotics has also tended to perpetuate misleading views, both among the profession and the public, and particularly regarding its therapeutic value.

Until comparatively recently alcoholism only in its grosser forms has been recognised pathologically and studied clinically, and, generally speaking, it has been customary to regard it as an unavoidable and even necessary evil. With the coming of clearer and fuller knowledge scientifically-directed effort may accomplish much that is rich in prophylactic power, and will perhaps discover measures fruitful in the permanent arrest of alcoholism.

III. THE RESULTS OF EXPERIMENT.

By the application of the experimental method many of our views regarding the action of alcohol have been recast, and knowledge concerning the nature of the pathological changes

induced much extended. New light has recently been thrown on the subject from many quarters.

The biologist has shown that the physical basis of life in both the animal and vegetable kingdoms may be detrimentally affected by alcohol.

The physiologist can demonstrate that alcohol, even when taken in comparatively small amounts, produces a distinct interference with the normal oxidation of the tissues, lowers the functional activity of various organs, impairs the working power of the human machine, and diminishes its capacity for endurance.

The pathologist now not only examines the morbid tissues of the human alcoholic, but can experimentally produce various disease processes such as are known to be induced by the action of alcoholic drinks.

The bacteriologist has shown that alcohol lowers powers of immunity and increases predisposition to many infectious diseases.

The experimental psychologist has also done much to explain the influence of alcohol on mental processes, and by means of psychometric tests has proved that it may slacken and derange mental action even when taken in quantities hitherto considered strictly moderate.

IV. THE EVIDENCE OF EXPERIENCE.

The conclusions of the experimentalist are in full accord with the experience of the clinician. It is remarkable how, almost simultaneously, in nearly every field of research into matters concerning the well-being of the human being, similar conclusions have been reached, pointing to alcohol as one of the chief causal factors in the establishment and maintenance of innumerable ills.

Students of evolution, working from the standpoint of the anthropologist, the historian, and the sociologist, have collected valuable evidence, which goes to show that alcoholism not only among savage races and primitive peoples, but amidst the highly civilized, has acted as a drag on human development.

Medical practitioners in all branches of the profession testify to the widespread disaster accruing from the all too-prevalent use of alcohol.

Physicians find that in every rank of life alcoholism is answerable, either directly or indirectly, not only for the widespread prevalence of many so-called minor ailments, but also for much of the deterioration and decay of tissues which form the physical basis of many chronic and not a few incurable affections.

The surgeon recognises in alcoholism a fruitful cause for injury and accident, a strongly predisposing factor in certain forms of infection, and a condition inimical to processes making for repair.

The neurologist and alienist of recent years have amassed an enormous amount of evidence from all parts of the country, which goes to show that either directly or indirectly alcohol is answerable for much of the widespread nervous derangement which exists, and is also undoubtedly a causal factor of great importance in the establishment of mental disease.

Important evidence is now forthcoming from those we are accustomed to speak of as "specialists," all of which evidence tends to show that alcoholism is more widespread and exercises a greater ill on the State than is generally admitted.

There is much reason to believe that alcoholism is extending among women.

Undoubtedly much of the disease and disaster which overtakes such a large proportion of the child-life of this country is due to alcoholism in the parents and the pernicious influence exerted by an alcoholic environment.

It is interesting to note the importance placed by those having to deal with diseases arising in tropical climates on the avoidance of alcoholic indulgence.

Mention should also be made of the valuable evidence afforded by medical advisers to assurance societies and those practising in the public services—the army and the navy.

Medical officers of health and sanitarians generally have not been slow to draw attention to the close connection between

alcoholism and various non-hygienic states and actual disease. It is well that the public should have been aroused to the close association of alcoholism with tuberculosis and other diseases usually considered preventable.

V. PRESENT-DAY PRACTICE.

Certain sections of the public are sometimes wont to accuse the medical profession of encouraging, or even initiating, habits of alcoholic excess, by an unrestricted advocacy or ill-regulated administration of alcohol. Whatever may have been the influence of medicine in the past, it is clear that now every well-informed practitioner is fully alive to his responsibility in regard to this matter.

The modern practitioner, whether in his capacity of personal medical adviser or custodian of the public health, willingly recognises and supports all rational hygienic measures which seek to establish and maintain habits of sobriety.

We acknowledge also in the practice of complete abstention from alcoholic drinks a sound and highly scientific prophylactic measure. And, as a profession, we are deeply impressed with the urgent necessity for reliable instruction in the hygienic principles on which temperance depends.

We also desire an extension of legal measures and rational means whereby the confirmed inebriate may be more effectually dealt with.

VI. ANTICIPATIONS.

It is very necessary to insist that in the scientific study of alcoholism we are but at the beginning.

We have still much to learn regarding its etiology, pathology and symptomatology, and as to treatment, we are yet in the experimental stage.

The investigation of inebriety opens fields of deepest interest to the biologist, and affords an insight into problems of the most pressing importance to the humanitarian.

With the coming of accurate knowledge it may be that reliable agencies will be secured whereby we may provide effectual prophylaxis. At least, in regard to our efforts to procure the arrest of alcoholism, we may justly contend that what is scientifically right cannot be ethically wrong.