DEPARTMENTAL COMMITTEE ON THE WELFARE OF THE BLIND:

NOTES ON THE REPORT.

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AN immense amount of careful, patient, and thorough work is revealed in this report, which is a most complete and thorough exposition of a complicated national problem. A cursory glance through its seventy odd pages shows this much, whilst it may be stated that there is not a paragraph which will not repay careful reading and thoughtful consideration. The various issues raised in the discussion of this large subject have each of them received ample attention by the division of the Report into 12 sections or heads followed by a general summary and conclusions.

Definition.—Statistics and Causation.

These sections commence with the Report of the Royal Commission of 1889, followed next (Section II.) by a most interesting outline of the scope of the problem. This includes statistics and data with regard to the number and occupations of the blind and particulars of the present position as indicated by reports furnished by the various institutions devoted to helping the blind and by the Poor-law returns. The section commences by defining blindness for the purpose of the Report. In the case of children the definition adopted by the Elementary Education (Blind and Deaf Children) Act, that in this Act the expression "blind" means too blind to be able to read the ordinary school-books used by children, is considered satisfactory. The definition of blindness in adults has always been a difficult matter, as obviously it is a term that can be applied with fairness to a large number of those who still have a little sight, though insufficient to enable them to lead independent lives. The Report decided to adopt the definition of blindness as expressed by the subcommittee of the Ophthalmic Section of the Royal Society of Medicine and adopted by the council of the section (1915), which suggested that "blind means too blind to perform work for which eyesight is essential." It is not likely that any will be disposed to question this definition as being fair, practical, and covering all debatable ground.

The Report then goes on to deal with statistics as to blindness and the causes of blindness. It points out that with regard to the number of the blind in this country the want of an exact definition as to the meaning of the term has made statistics very unreliable. So far as can be gathered, there seems of late years to have been very little change for the better. Ophthalmia neonatorum still claims its 10 per cent., but the returns only take us down to 1914, when notification first became compulsory. It was suggested by an eminent authority in his evidence on this point that the disease had been practically stamped out in lying-in hospitals, but possibly this rosy view will not bear very close investigation. It is hard to believe that even the greatest care, and the adoption of every precaution, will suffice to stamp out this disease, which will annually claim a percentage of victims even at lying-in hospitals. It is to be hoped when returns are available that notification will have proved to have been of some benefit, but the value of notification must necessarily depend upon its reaction with regard to the practical treatment of the disease, and of that we have so far no record.

Attention is called to the Report of the Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases, which came to the conclusion that over 50 per cent. of all cases of blindness was due to venereal diseases. That is undoubtedly a statement which every expert in this country will endorse. It is a very serious state of things and will continue to be so in spite of all the new and successful treatment of syphilis until the country has made up its mind to treat the question of syphilis itself in some saner and more practical manner than seems at present likely.

Occupational blindness—i.e., resulting from injuries received in the course of various trades—should, the Report says, receive more energetic treatment of a preventive nature. As a matter of proved fact, no force on earth short of compulsion by Act of Parliament will make the British workman adopt an attitude of common-sense in this matter and wear

protecting goggles at his work. The Report rightly suggests obligation, but does not mention who is to enforce it.

The greater part of the remainder of the Report, until we reach the general conclusions and summary, is devoted to the practical solution of the questions appertaining to the welfare of the blind, and deals therefore with education in its various aspects of elementary, professional and industrial, workshops, and miscellaneous organisations. It will be best to follow the Report over these various points by the consideration of the conclusions which follow them. These form 12 most admirable pages containing a great deal of original thought, and though some of the conclusions are controversial and unlikely to be adopted as they stand, still they tend to flood the problem of the welfare of the blind with new light, and this undoubtedly will lead to great things in the near future.

Central Control.

It is noteworthy that the first three paragraphs of these conclusions tread on altogether new ground. Placed before the consideration of any one question of education or training, and obviously put in this position in order to make them assume a capital importance, the committee recommend and have drawn up in these paragraphs a scheme of central control. Let us see what this means in the words of the Report:—

"We have come clearly to the conclusion that the condition of the blind in the United Kingdom calls for the more active intervention of the State to secure (a) central control, organisation, and assistance for the existing agencies of voluntary help, which could be utilised with far greater effect if centrally directed, and (b) additional assistance for the blind."

Following this preamble comes the outline of the scheme. Shortly it proposes the setting up of a special department known as the "Central Authority in the Ministry of Health," when and if such a Ministry be created, and in the meantime in the Local Government Board, its function to be the general care and supervision of the blind. The work would necessarily involve a large financial outlay, partly to meet the expenses involved in starting the recommendations which the committee favour later on (initial capital expenditure) and partly to provide for upkeep (annual expenditure). Much of the money required would probably be, as regards the former item, met by special grants from the votes of the Education Department. The committee are of opinion that the most urgent and expensive essential in this respect is the provision of more workshop accommodation. It calculates that about 3000 such shops at a cost of £100-£175 each are needed, involving an outside expenditure of about £500,000. The annual expenditure, it is explained, is extremely difficult to estimate. It would be concerned in respect of grants to institutions and organisations for the blind, pensions, and any other purposes which might arise from time to time. It is considered that it would probably be covered by £250,000 per annum. Passing on to the constitution of this proposed central authority the committee are of opinion that it should be carried out under the guidance of a strong advisory committee of persons associated with the care of the blind, the chairman of the advisory committee to be the Parliamentary secretary of the office in which the new department is established. All matters of policy should be referred to this committee, whilst all executive functions should be exercised by the department working in accordance with the recommendations of the advisory committee.

Such, briefly, is the scheme—a really big scheme, and undoubtedly the right one, and far ahead of anything that has hitherto been projected. There can be no possible doubt that if the question of the welfare of the blind is to be seriously tackled with a view to permanent and progressive improvement coördination of effort is essential. Coördination of effort can only be obtained by centralisation of effort, and centralisation further means economy of effort. It is the only means of stopping or limiting overlapping of work and extravagance in finance. The desirability of a central authority or board is therefore beyond question. The practical application of the scheme is obviously controversial, as, for instance, the recommendations as to finance, which are pious suggestions based on the theory that the wider you open your mouth the more you will get. However that may be, there is little doubt that if the principle of a central authority is adopted the money will be forthcoming from

somewhere. The intrusion of a Government official as the nominal head of such a board may be inevitable though it seems unfortunate. It is not to be expected that he would have any special knowledge, and certainly the interference of the State in the management would not conduce, if past history is to be trusted, to the success of the scheme. The ideal condition would be State-aided but not State-controlled.

Certain reservations have been appended to the scheme by some of the members of the committee. One of these, dealing with the financial aspect, favours a system of State pensions, for which there is something to be said, but there are many obvious difficulties. Even supposing that the greatest supervision is exercised, so that pensions are only granted to those properly qualified, there still can be no guarantee that the money is laid out in a suitable way by the recipient; and, further, it is certain that once the pension had been granted it would be exceedingly difficult to take it away, or, in fact, to control it at all, supposing the pensioner should prove himself in the future unworthy of help. In another reservation objection is made to the Exchequer being regarded as solely responsible for the necessary funds, and a point is made that there are other classes, such as deaf-mutes and the paralysed, for whom State aid could be demanded with equal force as for the blind. There seems at the present juncture to be no special reason to open a controversy as to ways and means. The main point is to establish a working basis, and something on the lines suggested by the Report which all the members have signed will be found to be the right guiding principle for action in the future.¹

Education and Training.

The Report favours residential institutions rather than day centres for elementary education of young children, together with the employment of blind teachers whose salaries should be on an equality with those of sighted teachers.

These are two most important points. With regard to the first, the reservation made by three members that education in residential institutions is not desirable for the majority of young blind children has much force. Institutional life, as pointed out in this reservation, is a poor substitute for home and family life, and it is difficult to understand why a young blind child should be sent to a boarding-school at an earlier age than a sighted child. It would, indeed, have been better if the Report had substituted "older" for "young," or specified some age such as "after ten years of age." The value of blind teachers is a proved fact, and in the future it is hoped that the practice of teaching the blind by the blind will become as universal as it is practicable. The note as to the salary paid to the blind teachers is inspired by obvious fairness.

Perhaps the most striking recommendation with regard to elementary education is the initiation of an after-care scheme to enable the authorities to keep in touch with each child after leaving the elementary school until he or she can be transferred to the care of either the secondary education authority or to some recognised organisation for the blind. This is excellent.

Professional and Industrial Training: Workshops and Miscellaneous Organisations.

Passing on to the training of adults in all its various phases, the Report is extremely practical, and this part can be recommended to the careful perusal of all those interested in the subject. The following are of special importance.

(a) The committee is satisfied that the crux of the problem of the blind in the United Kingdom is the inadequacy of workshop accommodation. The evidence is conclusive that the present accommodation should be doubled, and even this may not be sufficient.

(b) In addition, inspection and standardisation of production must follow with a system of coöperative buying of raw material and selling of produce.

(c) Persons who work at home should be visited and assisted in the purchase of materials and the marketing of their goods.

(d) Particular attention is called to the employment of blind women, who, except in rare cases, are unable to earn anything approaching an adequate wage.

(e) There is an urgent need for a central free library for the blind which, acting in coöperation with the home teaching societies and public libraries, would facilitate the circulation and distribution of books available, and minimise the danger of unnecessary duplication in production.

Each one of the above recommendations is both novel and excellent. They all help to show the urgency of a central control authority, without which not one of them is practicable. It is devoutly to be hoped that the institution of such a central driving force will not be shelved, and indeed it is not likely that such will be the case, seeing how the war has aroused the general interest of the nation in those who have suffered from it.

The Report finishes its work with some recommendations with regard to the administration of the Poor-law and pensions and a well-deserved note of confidence and approbation of the steps taken at St. Dunstan's Hostel to ensure the welfare of our blinded soldiers and sailors. Many of the recommendations of the committee with regard to the training of the blind are at the present time in force at St. Dunstan's and are answering well.

Place of Ophthalmology in Medical Education.

Further, before closing I wish to note a reservation signed by Sir Arthur Downes, who once more desires to draw attention to the memorial to the General Medical Council from the Ophthalmological Society of the United Kingdom in 1891, which points out the desirability of a more general knowledge of ophthalmology by the general medical student, it being "notorious that the general body of the profession does not possess a competent knowledge of diseases of the eye."

That opinion, unfortunately, holds as good to-day as in 1891. When will the universities and colleges realise the necessity for a forward move in this respect? This war has shown us many things, and none more clearly than this—viz., the general lack of knowledge of the treatment of eye diseases and injuries. Many eminent experts in this branch of surgery are doing their utmost at this moment, and doing it well, but it is only the bare truth that a certain number of blinded men drift from hospital whose sight might at least have been partially saved if their cases had been understood, or at any rate treated on proper lines. The whole fault lies with the examining boards, the members of whom are admittedly entirely at sea in everything that appertains to ophthalmology, and who, therefore, can hardly be expected to examine students on this subject. The students know this, and, having quite enough to do to deal with the subjects of which the examiners are cognisant, they, or the greater number of them, simply neglect ophthalmology.

NATIONAL INSURANCE ACT.

Treatment of the Invalided Sailor or Soldier.

MEMORANDUM 234/I.C., setting out a scheme for the treatment of sailors and soldiers discharged as no longer physically fit for war service, was briefly summarised in THE LANCET of Sept. 8th, p. 404. The Memorandum was marked by the Insurance Commissioners who compiled it as being "For Issue to Doctors," and since its appearance it has received careful attention at the hands of those members and sections of the medical profession likely to be most affected by it. Its reception has not been favourable. The medical practitioners who serve on the panels and who, for the most part, have done so ever since the first National Insurance Act came into force, are not only interested in the matter to a greater extent than their non-panel colleagues, but having been constantly in touch with the practical aspects of the Insurance Acts are, to speak generally, in the position of expert critics.

The criticisms levelled at the Commissioners' scheme are, in the first place, directed against the principle and details of the financial arrangements proposed, the main contention being, to quote from a resolution of the Gloucestershire Panel Committee, that "while the machinery of the Insurance Act may conveniently be employed, the expense should be met by a Treasury grant, and should in no way fall upon Insurance funds." To what extent the proposals of the Commissioners involve drawing upon Insurance funds for the provision of medical benefit for uninsured sailors

¹ On Wednesday last, since this article was written, the Prime Minister has stated that the recommendations of the Departmental Committee will be favourably considered by the War Cabinet.