SOME THOUGHTS ON HEALTH EDUCATION.*

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BEFORE proceeding with my paper, I should like first of all to thank you for the honour you have conferred upon me in electing me president of our Branch for the ensuing year.

My choice of a suitable subject for the presidential address has been to some extent simplified by the fact that a movement has recently been initiated in Wales—in the form of a Welsh National Memorial to His late Majesty King Edward the Seventh—which will have for its object the stamping out of tuberculosis in the Principality. The scheme, which is intended to be of a most comprehensive character, will deal not merely with the practical treatment of cases of pulmonary tuberculosis, but will have for its main object the education of the people of this country with a view to the prevention of the spread of this national scourge.

Viewed from any standpoint, I think we are all agreed that good health is the most valuable asset a man can possibly possess, and that all that is best in life is associated with sound health.

Now I venture to think that many of us become ill chiefly through a lack of precise knowledge concerning the laws of health, and through the want of a right and proper thinking as to how health may be obtained. Though we have been taught many important subjects in our schools and elsewhere, yet we have rarely had the subject of health explained to us in a simple and rational manner. We do things heedlessly and recklessly, and instead of pondering on the matter ourselves, we rely far too much on others to look after our own and the national health. We have, in fact, not been educated in the matter.

The subject is one which should be taught in every school in the kingdom, and not only in the school but in the home, and in importance should rank second to none, for on the health of the individual depends the health of the nation.

This has at last been recognized by the State in a very practical form, and, as we are all aware, every child in our elementary schools must be now medically examined four

times during its school life—viz., on admission, at seven years of age, at ten, and on leaving. The object of this examination is to discover physical defects in the child, but not only to do that, which in itself would be of very little value, but what is of far more importance, to see that children found to be defective receive proper medical treatment in order that they may grow up into strong and healthy men and women. Many children have defects which are not recognized by the parents, sometimes through neglect and carelessness, but more often through ignorance than anything else, and the State has now constituted itself a kind of foster-mother, and has taken upon itself the duty of finding out those defects, in order that the children may have the benefit of medical advice and treatment at a time when they are growing up and are at the mercy of their parents, who oftentimes fail to realize the importance of good health in the young.

The seeds of disease are often laid in infancy, and if a child can be protected during the "growing age"—which is the most important part of its life—there is no reason why it should not become strong and healthy.

What we want is this—a more precise knowledge as to how we may safeguard ourselves against disease. The words of Hosea—"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge"—are probably more true to-day than in the days of old, and that in spite of the great advances of civilization. Education is undoubtedly the means by which this more precise knowledge may be obtained. The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Lloyd George) has recently well said that "the greatness of the German nation is to be attributed not to the German Army but to education." We may make laws innumerable, but these will be insignificant in their effect compared with a commonsense and more rational thinking on the part of the individual. For example, no Licensing Bill will ever solve the drink problem, however good its intentions. As a nation we have been, and are still becoming, much more sober. This is shown in one way by the fact that brewery dividends are falling, and that in order to keep up their profits the brewers find it necessary to give us weaker beer. This, I hope, will continue until the beer becomes so weak that it will hurt nobody. It is education which is solving the drink problem. We no longer find time to be idle, and when our day's work is done we pursue other interests which have been

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formed to supply a demand for which our education is responsible—that is, a demand for further knowledge.

Now I hold very strongly to the opinion that the duty of a medical officer of health should consist not merely in carrying out the legal requirements of the law, but should have for one of its main objects the real education of the general public in all matters relating to health. We must put forth our best efforts in an endeavour to get the people to use their commonsense, and to put into practice the old saying that “prevention is better than cure.” This process of education should apply first of all to the Board of Education itself; secondly, to the various examining bodies of this country; thirdly, to the teachers in our various schools; fourthly, to the children in those schools; fifthly, to the parents both in the home and out of it; and, lastly, to the general public at large.

To those of us who have carefully watched the results of our present system of education one fact appears to stand out above all others, and it is this: that the present curriculum is sadly overburdened with a multiplicity of subjects which a child is expected to store up in its little brain, oftentimes to the detriment of the physical and mental health of the child. Many of these subjects are utterly valueless in after-life to the vast majority of the children attending the elementary schools, and might well be dispensed with altogether. In my opinion the Board of Education would be well advised if they were to so simplify the code as to return to the practice of former years, and insist upon greater proficiency in the three R's. This, together with properly drawn-up lessons on the means to be adopted to secure and maintain good health throughout life, would be all that is necessary for children up to, say, twelve years of age. Children with a sound knowledge of these subjects will easily pick up information necessary for other subjects.

I have often been struck with the fact that many children are admitted into our elementary schools at far too early an age, some even at three years. Personally, I think it quite unnecessary that any child should be sent to school at such an early age. Apart from the fact that children at these early ages are at a stage of life when they most easily catch infectious disease, and are also more liable to succumb to it, I feel convinced that their time would be much better spent in running about in the open air, in building up a sound body.

The child would lose nothing by so doing, for it would absorb knowledge much more rapidly and usefully at a later age, and in addition the ratepayers would be relieved from the useless expenditure of money, spent not in educating the children but merely in providing nurseries. With proper housing conditions these nurseries could be provided by the parents in their own homes.

During the four years 1898-1902 I acted as science master at Harrow School, where over 600 boys are taught, I was very much impressed with the number of different subjects which a boy had to master before he could possibly expect to pass the various competitive and other examinations necessary for his future career. Many of our examinations are being made increasingly difficult by the constant addition of new subjects without the necessary compensative deletion of certain portions of the syllabus which experience has taught us might well be dispensed with. This is especially true of the medical profession. The result is that during the growing years of life an excessive strain is thrown upon the student, and he finds when too late that the constant hard study has made him a physical wreck, and that his body is not sufficiently strong to stand the strain of his profession. I daresay we could all of us point to a number of brilliant medical men who have died at a very early age, whose bodies, owing to forced application to hard mental work in earlier years, were too weak to stand the physical strain of after-life, and who rapidly succumbed to disease.

Now, practical success in life depends far more upon physical health than is commonly imagined. Many of the most successful men of to-day are men who have been born and bred in the country, and who have, fortunately, escaped the evils of our present-day system of education and examinations. I think that if the number of subjects were lessened and the old apprenticeship system substituted we should not only better our knowledge of our various professions, but we should ourselves maintain far healthier bodies. Life, as you know, is becoming extremely strenuous, and it behoves the various authorities of this country to look carefully into the matter to see that their methods do not tend in the future to make the people of this country a race of physical degenerates.

This forcing of the minds of the young leads oftentimes to disastrous results in later life. Many young men appear brilliant in examinations up to about the age of twenty-two, and

after this they never seem to develop either physically or intellectually. They become absolutely worked out. I have known several such examples among my own schoolfellows, and I have no hesitation in attributing such evil results to our present system of education.

Again, I have been struck with the fact that men who have been known at school and the University as fairly good athletes, but dull at their books, have settled down to work at the age of twenty-two, and have then easily outstripped many so-called brilliant schoolboys in the absorption of knowledge. Their main education at school and the University has been directed to the building up of a sound, strong body, with the natural result that when the proper time came they were able to absorb knowledge far more intelligently and at a much more rapid pace than the others.

The medical inspection of the children in our public elementary schools is quite a new feature in the school life of the children, and many of the teachers have not yet altogether taken to their new duties. In some cases this is probably due to the fact that the teachers were already overburdened with work previous to the adoption of the systematic medical inspection of the children. But in many cases the teachers fail to realize the importance of a sound, healthy body in a young child: to them the all-important thing appears to be the cramming of the little ones' minds with what is called, but quite erroneously, knowledge. Such teachers must themselves be taught that the first essential in life is a sound, healthy body, and that children who are unhealthy are not merely a source of danger to other children, but are in such a condition that they are unable to absorb knowledge to the best advantage. But, alas! it is not always easy to teach a teacher that he has anything more to learn, at least in this world!

The children in the schools must spend a large proportion of their time in learning what health really means, in order that they may be able to stand the strain of later life. And this is where the teachers will play the most important part of all, for on the quality of their teaching will depend to an enormous extent the health of future generations. I do not think it necessary in this paper to give a list of the subjects which should be taught, nor how they should be taught.

As far as the parents and the general public at large are concerned, there is no doubt that as regards health their education has been

sadly neglected. They should remember that we differ from the lower animals only in this, that we are highly developed intellectually, but that as regards our bodies we are animals pure and simple. Consequently, if we ever want to know whether we are doing the right thing for ourselves, we should always compare ourselves with the lower animals and study Nature generally. In the words of Wordsworth—

"Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your Teacher."

Nature shows us that a mother always suckles her young, that no young animal is ever seen walking about our streets with a "comforter" or "dummy" in its mouth, that the young are always allowed to sleep as long as they will, and that they are not awakened to be fed at regular intervals during the day or night. Further, the lower animals do not alter their habits when the baby arrives; their young are accustomed from birth to the ordinary noises surrounding them. Many parents make the fatal mistake of altering their habits when the baby arrives. They go about the house on tip-toe, they speak in hushed whispers, they do not bang the doors or play the piano. The result is that if by chance a noise is made, the baby (who of course has never been accustomed to it) wakes up and is frightened, with the result that one or other of the luckless parents has to walk the room at night. Among the poorer classes the babies are accustomed to almost any noise: I have even seen a baby sleeping peacefully in its mother's arms when the parents have been shouting and fighting.

Again, Nature teaches us that it is quite the proper thing to partake of a heavy meal before retiring to rest. All the lower animals take their heaviest meal before their longest sleep. I mention this because an opinion prevails that no one should consume a heavy meal before retiring to bed. Of course, if it is found that such a meal causes nightmare, the sooner one drops it the better.

Most Public Health Authorities now issue instructions to the general public as to how they may safeguard themselves against consumption, and how a baby should be fed. There is an endeavour in this way to give the people more precise knowledge on these particular subjects. I hope in the near future to see such instructions given in the case of many other diseases. Now you will find that very few hospitals ever attempt to give instruction in this way. All hospitals should have printed instructions bearing on various diseases, and these should be

given to people suffering from such complaints. Take the case of cancer. At the Cancer Hospital, London, I was instrumental in having such instructions printed and distributed by the patients to their friends, and one of the most important of these was this:—"Cancer often begins as a small painless lump which causes no discomfort of any kind. You are therefore strongly urged to seek medical advice on the appearance of any lump however small and painless." Many a life would be saved if the general public only knew that cancer usually starts in this way.

We must teach the general public that the necessary requisites for good health are:—

1. Plain, wholesome food.
2. Pure water.
3. Fresh air and sunlight.
4. Sufficient sleep and exercise.
5. Plain and suitable clothing.
6. Dry and suitable houses.
7. Cleanliness.
8. A sensible education.
9. A definite, healthy occupation.
10. A definite hobby.
11. A contented mind.
12. Moderation in everything.

What is called civilization is responsible for many evils. We are living at a much faster pace than did our ancestors. Prince Bülow, the former German Chancellor, a short time ago said that "as a nation the English were becoming more excitable." This is perfectly true. We are inclined to lose that stolidity and level-headedness which are so characteristic of us as a nation. I have often wondered at the extraordinary number and variety of patent medicines and foods now sold in this country, most of which profess to cure all the diseases to which we are subject. There must be an enormous demand for them on the part of the people, otherwise they would not exist. The general public should be taught that a dose of castor oil will be found more efficient than 90 per cent. of them put together.

In spite of many modern advantages of to-day, people do not think as intelligently as did many of our forefathers. There is a vast deal of ignorance flying about, and it is tending to increase. People will not think for themselves. They prefer to read in the newspaper a lying paragraph of some quack medicine which professes to cure an enormous number of diseases, and in their ignorance they believe what they read. What is wanted is more intelligent thought and commonsense. I have seen

quacks on a public platform remove splints from children who were suffering from tuberculous disease of the bones or joints, and who were brought to them for treatment by the most ignorant of mothers. I have seen these rogues remove the splints, break down the adhesions which Nature was forming as a defence to the spread of the disease, and so cripple the child that it was in a far worse condition than before. It is one of the greatest blots on our civilisation that unprincipled scoundrels of this kind should be allowed to spread havoc among the poorer classes. It is high time that the Government took steps to put a stop to these practices.

There are of course many other points on which the general public require to be educated, viz.:—The segregation of the mentally unfit, with a view to the prevention of the propagation of their species; the evils of the present-day system of contract practice; the absurdity of Christian Science, when it seeks to dispense with medical advice and treatment; and many others which will readily occur to you. In Swansea I might mention that I have been successful in the introduction of the individual Communion-cup in a large number of Nonconformist places of worship.

I feel I have already detained you long enough, and as I do not want to run the risk of wearying you, I will conclude my address with the statement that I look to education (provided it is of the right kind) as the best practical means which we can adopt to improve the children of the present generation, and as a natural sequence the health of future generations.

THE HUMAN INTEREST IN MEDICAL INSPECTION. —The human interest in medical inspection is all-absorbing. For some misguided reason certain commentators upon medical inspection have characterized this work as "extremely monotonous." As a matter of fact the work is extremely entertaining. If there is much that saddens, there is more that cheers and amuses. The children take a deep interest in their heights and weights and in their increase in growth now that the second round is being carried out. Among the future wrestlers of Westmorland there is a healthy rivalry in chest measurement. Much yet remains to be done, but it is cheering to observe how the attention to the physical defects of the children is already transforming the quondam "dunce" into a more intelligent child.—*Annual Report of Dr. Henderson, County Medical Officer of Health, Westmorland.*