Smallpox

Like a volcano which rumbles and smokes long before it explodes, smallpox gives the world a timely warning. Within the last five years, local epidemics have occurred in Scotland, Germany, France, Spain, Australia, Burmah, the Philippines, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Santo Domingo, Canada, and in several of our own states, in one of which an epidemic exists at present. There is evidence in these outbreaks to indicate that smallpox is becoming more virulent as well as more common. The mortality rate in some instances has been as high as 40 per cent. The number of cases in 1921 in ninety-three American cities was reported by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company to be 138 per cent. greater than in 1920, and the number of deaths in proportion to the number of cases, six times greater. A contagious disease so virulent cannot be taken lightly, however restricted the area in which it prevails.

The history of the disease in the prevaccination epoch shows that long periods of quiescence are followed by virulent epidemics. The intervals are characterized by less virulent, sporadic cases, or by a mild type of the disease, such as has prevailed in the United States for about twenty years. Susceptible material gradually accumulates during these years, chiefly from the large number of children that grow up unvaccinated. By processes as yet not well understood, the virulence of the disease increases again, outbreaks become epidemics, and smallpox once more stalks abroad as “Captain of the Men of Death.” In the eighteenth century, only one person in twenty-five in England escaped the disease. It was constantly present in London, where the deaths at times numbered from 3,000 to 15,000 yearly. In the same century, Boston had seven severe epidemics. With a population in 1721 of 11,000, Boston had more than 6,000 cases of smallpox and 850 deaths, a mortality rate of 77 per thousand. To understand what that rate means, one should compare the epidemic of influenza of 1918, which caused only 8 deaths per thousand, about an eighth or a ninth of Boston's mortality rate from smallpox in 1721. In recent years, few large cities have suffered more than Philadelphia where, within the thirty-three years ending in 1904, three epidemics occurred, with more than 30,000 cases and 7,600 deaths. In this day of rapid intercommunication, it is well to recall that smallpox was introduced into Montreal in 1885 by an unvaccinated Pullman car porter, causing 15,000 cases and 3,164 deaths.

Indifference to the disease and prejudice against the chief means of prevention make the present situation more serious. A long period of comparative immunity has made people careless regarding vaccination; and some physicians have become careless and have failed to urge vaccination on their patients. To make matters worse, a vicious propaganda has misled many people to oppose vaccination openly. Thus the percentage of the population that is unprotected has grown and, unless conditions in this regard improve, outbreaks of smallpox may be expected. To encourage vaccination at this particular time is to do a public service.