Preventable Disease and Map-Changing Medicine

When huge armies were throwing every ounce of their energies against the opposing line, it was constantly realized that the spread of epidemic disease might mean defeat for the affected side. Preventive medicine, in thus being called on to keep every possible man at the front, came into unusual prominence. Foci of contagion existed in various parts of the globe, and the intermingling of peoples, and the crossing and recrossing of seas, invited contagion to spread; but with one exception, the major demons were kept confined to regions in which they commonly prevail in endemic form. With the World War ended, the sanitary organization was largely dismantled; but the urge for conservation of life and energy did not stop and is still going on. From an examination of developments in the world-wide warfare on disease now being waged by various institutions and agencies, Showalter, in an illustrated article in the National Geographic Magazine (September), predicts three announcements of almost unprecedented importance to mankind at no distant date: that (1) yellow fever has been banished from the face of the earth; (2) hookworm disease can be driven from any community which has the will to get rid of it, and (3) malaria can be eradicated from almost any community having enough vital force left to push a thorough yet inexpensive campaign for its extirpation. The widespread incidence of hookworm disease is revealed when it is known that three out of five persons examined in China, three out of four in Siam, and five out of eight in various parts of India are so afflicted. Similar conditions prevail in Brazil, Colombia, Central America, the West Indies and elsewhere. How successful a campaign against this disease may be was shown in Richmond County, Va., where the world-wide fight against hookworm had its inception. About thirteen years ago, when the eradication work began, 82 per cent. of the people of Richmond County had this disease. A survey a few years later showed that only 35 per cent. had the disease; a more recent survey reduced it to 2 per cent., and in 1922 there is apparently not a single person in the county with symptoms of hookworm disease.

Malaria, which, it has been claimed, was largely responsible for the passing of the “glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome,” today still lays a heavy hand on millions of people who dwell where it prevails; and yet it costs only one-fourth as much to eradicate the disease as to permit it to prevail. Simple drainage, filling pits and shallow pools, channeling streams, clearing the margins of streams and ponds, removing obstructions, turning in the sunlight, oiling, using top minnows, and quinin are the measures which, when applied with a will, produce astonishing results in malaria-infested regions. With these weapons, malaria was virtually driven from fifty-two towns in ten Southern states at an average cost of 78 cents per capita. Similar measures have been successful against yellow fever, and few foci of that disease now exist.

Sanitary science thus offers hope for freedom from three plagues of man. The plans of campaign for still broader work are well mapped out. They await the officers who will direct the forces in the fight. The number of public health leaders is inadequate now, and calls for trained sanitarians keep coming from all parts of the world. To meet this demand, eleven American universities, and schools in Canada, South America and Europe have established courses in public health and hygiene. Some few years must elapse before the effect of this training will be fully appreciated, but the forces are mobilizing now for the final, successful campaign against several transmissible diseases.

A Physician's Function.—My function as a physician is not discharged when I say to a solicitous client, “There is nothing the matter with you,” unless that opinion is fully accepted. And if my patient continues to believe there is something the matter with him, there is something the matter with him, and my function has not been fulfilled until I have made him see, as I see, that he is not in jeopardy. —(Favill, Henry B., The Public and the Medical Profession, A Square Deal, Penn. M. J., November, 1915.)

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