

Medical Matters.

DIRTY HANDS.

THE DANGERS OF COLON BACILLI.

Dr. R. G. Eccles, of Brooklyn, New York, writing in *The Dietetic and Hygienic Gazette* on the subject of Dirty Hands, says that there is no act of life so dangerous to others as carelessness concerning the condition of our hands. There is nothing that so deserves popular reprobation as failure to wash the hands when such washing is shown by scientific research to be a sacred duty. We cannot call that murder which lacks intent to kill, but so near to murder is it that, with increased public knowledge, the time is sure to come when dirty-handed people will have to endure an opprobrium that will make them skulk in shame or hide in fear. The writer proceeds to point out that what is meant by dirty hands by the average layman is not the same thing as that referred to by him. Mud and soil, dust and ashes, paint and varnish are, in the eyes of science, *clean dirt*. The "great unwashed" revel in such dirt, and, the moral effect being excluded, no harm comes to them from it. But—and the crux of the difference between their meaning of "dirty hands" and ours lies in this—this dirt of theirs, by being an index of careless habits, becomes a visible index of the invisible dirt that is deadly. People who are willing to tolerate the visible dirt are pretty sure to be none too careful concerning the dangerous dirt. The two kinds get blended.

Professor Sedgwick, in his "Principles of Sanitary Science," tells us that the word "dirt" appears to be derived from an old Saxon word 'drit,' meaning excrement," and that "dirt is not dangerous because it is of the earth earthy, but because it is too often 'drit,' or excrement." It is the unseen "drit" that plays the mischief with human life, because it is alive and can multiply indefinitely. Once this is realised, every one must admit the obligation of thoroughly washing the hands after the daily evacuations.

The chief unintentional crime of our age—if we can call that which is unconscious and unintentional a crime—is dirty hands. Its criminality lies in the fact that it destroys human life—not occasionally, but daily and hourly in every land upon our globe.

Nature makes no allowance for ignorance, and her sentences are never mitigated in the slightest whether offences are committed by prince or peasant, university professor or street arab. If we eat polluted bread or drink polluted milk neither piety nor disbelief in the danger from such eating is going to save us from the inevitable sickness and death that

follow such conduct. . . . If our hands are dirty with unnameable dirt, though we may not personally be "disease carriers," yet we should be deemed responsible because of the risk we bring upon others. The danger is there, and it is every man's duty to do all in his power to minimise it. He who, by his unspeakably disgusting habits, kills his dearest friends, sends into eternity his own children, delivers to the reaper, Death, his own wife, sister, or parent, should be taught—forcibly, if need be—when and how to wash his hands, in order to put an end to such wholly avoidable tragedies. But it is not men only that are thus guilty. Statistics have shown that women slay in this way more victims than men. Of the destruction wrought by unclean hands in the one disease—typhoid fever—the Editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* tells us that "All the striking cases in the literature are cooks or cooks' helpers, bakers, dairy workers, etc., occupations involving the constant handling of substances which are excellent culture media for the typhoid bacillus." That this single disease is not the only one carried on dirty hands can be seen from the following words of Dr. Simon Flexner: "Perhaps the chief single compelling phenomena is that of the microbe carrier. . . ." The evil wrought by the microbe carrier does not end with the typhoid bacillus. He has been found to disseminate typhoid fever, dysentery, plague, cholera, influenza, spinal meningitis, and in certain localities a host of protozoan disease.

That the average citizen does actually fail to wash his hands when he should do so without fail is matter of proof. Bacteriologists have experimentally shown that after a dozen or so of average men and women have dipped their hands successively into a small font of water that the water swarms with colon bacilli. We soon begin to realise how almost impossible it is for us to keep our own hands clean as long as civility and custom makes it obligatory for us to shake hands with people whose habits of life are unknown to us. Hands that are able to pollute water by a mere touch cannot possibly be shaken without leaving behind evidences of unnameable dirt. These are the kind of hands that handle our bread, our meat, our fruit, our vegetables, our pastry, and our money. No one can picture to himself the naked truth of the situation without shrinking from it in intense disgust.

The important thing in this connection is the formation of habit. Once the habit of purifying the hands at the proper time is formed, all will recoil from failure to attend to so important a duty.

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