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EDITORIAL.

AN URGENT SOCIAL PROBLEM.

The Departmental Committee on Sterilisation appointed by the Board of Control in June, 1932, to report on the present state of knowledge of the causes of mental defect and disorder, and to examine the case on scientific, and not religious, grounds for sterilisation, have now presented their Report to the Minister of Health.

The Committee unanimously recommended, without a word of dissent, or reservation of any kind, that voluntary sterilisation should be legalised in the case of any person who is mentally defective, or has suffered from mental disorder, or is likely to transmit either incapacity, and also in the case of any person who suffers from a grave physical disability and is likely to transmit it.

The Committee pronounce against compulsory sterilisation on the ground that it could only be justified if it could be shown that some at least of the offspring of a particular person were bound to be mentally deficient. In the present state of scientific knowledge this cannot with certainty be predicted by examination of one partner of a union.

They are further of opinion that compulsion would defeat itself. It would merely drive mental deficiency underground.

The composition of the Committee which has made these important and far-reaching recommendations is as follows:—

Chairman: Mr. L. G. Brock, Chairman of the Board of Control.

Mr. Wilfred Trotter, Sergeant Surgeon to the King.

Prof. R. A. Fisher, head of the Galton Laboratory in London University.

Miss Ruth Darwin, a Senior Commissioner of the Board of Control, and granddaughter of Charles Darwin.

Dr. R. H. Crowley, Senior Medical Officer of the Board of Education.

Dr. E. O. Lewis, Commissioner of the Board of Control, and

Dr. E. W. Adams, representing the Minister of Health.

Amongst the recommendations of the Committee are:—

Sterilisation should be regarded as a right and not as a punishment.

Written authorisation of the Minister of Health to be necessary for every operation of sterilisation.

Two medical certificates to be required for each operation—one from the family doctor and one from a doctor on a list approved by the Minister.

Dealing with the legal position of sterilisation, the Committee point out that it is quite lawful to sterilise any person in the interest of the patient's medical treatment. This is called "therapeutic sterilisation." But "eugenic sterilisation," to prevent the birth of tainted offspring, is not lawful, and any surgeon who performs an operation with this intent takes the risk of legal proceedings.

SPEED—A BENEFICENT PLAGUE.

The evidence of hopeless poverty, and the horrible evidence of disease no longer offends the eye in London, to the extent which it did half a century ago. Much has been done by humanitarian effort to enforce the laws of health as defined by science and common sense. Life is prolonged but in spite of a decreased birthrate, we are still vastly over-populated.

Fifty years ago we well remember a night sister at Bart's (of all women the most altruistic and beloved) remarking after wrestling through a catastrophic night with dirt and disease, "What we really need is a beneficent plague, Black Death, cholera, typhus; what will be done when science has swept them all away?"

What indeed!

Had she been alive to-day she would have realised that the Juggernaut of motor mechanism was upon us, and Speed was a most effective substitute for any Black Death, though any such suggestion that the people are being massacred and maimed in thousands as the result of speed, would be insidiously denied by those responsible, in drawing their cautious conclusions as to the rapidly increasing deaths and disasters from motor traffic, even if they did not pooh-pooh the idea that unlimited speed had anything whatever to do with such fatalities.

The fact remains that the Home Office statement on road accidents gives the following figures of road victims last year:—

In Britain.—Killed, 7,125; an increase of 458 on 1932. Injured, 216,401; an increase of 9,951.

In London.—Killed, 1,409; increase 142. Injured 56,967; increase 4,520.

The figures for London show an average death-roll of four a day.

There is no official classification available of victims into motorists or pedestrians. Both, no doubt, may be somewhat to blame, but we maintain that the primary cause of death is caused by the "beneficent plague" of speed. Children and old people who cannot skip out of the way are toppled over like ninepins, the more agile escape with increased heart and nerve strain.

Surely we are individually responsible for such heartless sacrifice of life.

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