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Editorial.

A Disturbing Question.

IT IS LONG SINCE a domestic question has aroused so great a controversy as the findings in the Report of the Standing Advisory Committee on Cancer and Radiotherapy—made public by the Minister of Health, Mr. Macleod—"That there is a relationship between smoking and cancer of the lung."

Although this possibility has for many years been at the back of men's minds and the opinion generally been held that excessive smoking is detrimental to health (as for example smoker's heart) that such an authoritative assertion should come, following some three years' investigation, to say the least of it, brings a rude awakening to the nation—smokers and non-smokers alike!

It is therefore all the more alarming to learn of the figures given by the Minister of the increase in deaths from lung cancer in England and Wales:—

Between 1911 and 1919 there were about 250 deaths a year from lung cancer. In 1931 the figure had risen to 1,358 for men and 522 for women.

In 1952 11,981 men and 2,237 women died of lung cancer. This represented 26 per cent. of all cancer deaths and nearly 5 per cent. of deaths from all causes in males. Among females it was 5 per cent. of all cancer deaths and 1 per cent. of deaths from all causes.

There were comparable increases in the disease in all countries from which reliable statistics were available, factors such as increasing age and better diagnosis did not account for the whole rise. The evidence did not permit more to be said than that there was a presumption that smoking affected lung cancer.

Young People Warned.

The Report considered that the relationship between smoking and lung cancer had been established, that it was apparent that the risk increased with the amount smoked, particularly of cigarettes, and that young people should be warned of these risks of excessive smoking.

"The daily number of cigarettes to become dangerous" was not known although five had been suggested. They were trying to find out why cigarettes seemed to be more dangerous than pipes.

To touch on the history of tobacco and its amazing use: In 1558 Francisco Fernandes, sent by Philip of Spain to investigate the products of Mexico, brought the tobacco plant to Europe.

Seeds of the plant were sent to the Queen, Catherine de Medici by Jean Nico, the French Ambassador to Portugal, who for his zeal in spreading a knowledge of the herb, has been commemorated in the scientific name of the genus—"Nicotiana."

At first extraordinary healing powers were ascribed to the plant, so much so that it was referred to by Spenser, in such glowing terms as "divine tobacco" and by William Lilly as "our holy Nicotian." The use of tobacco is more widely spread than that of any other narcotic or stimulant. It is generally believed that Ralph Lane, the first Governor of Virginia, first introduced the tobacco "pipe" into Europe, and who in 1586 brought an Indian tobacco pipe to Sir Walter Raleigh, teaching him how to use it.

It was Ralph Lane and Sir Francis Drake who first brought to the notice of Sir Walter Raleigh the smoking habit, and of whom history records that "He tooke a pipe of tobacco a little before he went to the scaffold."

The habit became rooted among Elizabethan courtiers, spreading with great rapidity through all nations.

The Challenge—No Proof.

To the declared opinion embodied in conclusions of the Standing Advisory Committee, that there is a relationship between smoking and cancer of the lung there comes a useful challenge from a group of Britain's tobacco manufacturers in the gift of £250,000 "with a full sense of their responsibility to the public"—to be available over the next seven years for research.

The Medical Council would be asked to undertake the responsibility, as the tobacco companies recognise the importance of accelerating medical research, to ascertain the true cause or causes of the disease.

Among the facts pointed out by the tobacco companies—to the contrary—that the disease is much more common in towns than in country districts, yet there is no corresponding difference in the average amount smoked by people living in towns and in the country.

Medical authorities here and in other countries are laying increasing emphasis on atmospheric pollution as a possible cause of the disease. The question might also be added—what about petrol fumes?—more or less in our midst.

In face of these factors there is no doubt that the gesture of the tobacco companies is greatly welcomed as a step in the right direction, which may reveal other causes of the dread disease which otherwise would not have been discovered.

It is to be hoped that anyone reading this will not follow the example of the man who, on reading of the dire results attendant upon smoking—"gave up reading"! A. S. B.

A custom loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs, and in the black, stinking fume thereof nearest resembling the horrible stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless.

JAMES I (OF ENGLAND).

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