

On the Inquiries into the Condition of the Poor in London and York by Messrs. Booth and Rowntree.

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I.—HOUSING.

It is a well-known fact that the presence of many diseases, notably tuberculosis in its many forms, is very largely due to the manner of life of the people at large. It is further stated that the enormous mortality from consumption (60,000 per annum in Great Britain and Ireland) could be diminished, and perhaps finally extinguished, could the inhabitants of these islands live under such conditions of sanitation and feeding as would enable each individual to keep himself in such a state of bodily health that his system could defy the attacks of the tubercle bacillus. Such a condition of things does not now, and perhaps never will, come within the range of practical politics; but no sensible person doubts that an immense amount can be done, even with the existing legal machinery, towards improving the state of the poor in this respect.

The first step lies in recognising the evil before us, understanding what is required and how amelioration can be best obtained.

The recent publication of Mr. Booth's survey of London and Mr. Rowntree's study of York show clearly enough the miserable condition of the majority of our town dwellers, and when we take into consideration the recognised connection between disease and neglect of the laws of health we feel very strongly how serious a national danger lies at our very doors. It may, therefore, be of service briefly to glance at the results of the inquiries by these gentlemen into the housing of the poor, and their social and economic condition, especially as regards food and drink, premising our remarks by the observation that their investigations may be regarded as showing typically the condition of the working classes in all our large towns. (This is fully borne out if we examine further the reports of the medical officers of health for such urban districts as Brighton and Manchester.)

HOUSING.

Although the condition of things in London is shown to be greatly improved during the last ten years (this being also the case in all our large cities), the present state of over-crowding is appalling, especially in the district round Tottenham Court Road, where there is not great excess of poverty, and St. Saviour's on the south side of the Thames, where poverty and crowding "are both at their worst." The tenement system very largely prevails in the London slums, entailing, as it generally does, an entire absence of ventilation. The crowded rooms on each side of passage or landing, storey above storey, never empty of occupants night or day, cannot, by their very nature, ever be flushed with air; often extremely filthy, the reek of them is poisonous, and they form a happy breeding-ground for all sorts of bacilli and vermin. In York, although "nearly every family lives in a separate house" (a two-storeyed cottage without attic or cellar), many of them are built actually back to back.

Here, also, there can be no sort of ventilation; in fact, the worst of the slums are as bad as any to be found in the metropolis. According to Mr. Rowntree, "0.7 per cent. of the total population of York are living in single-roomed tenements"; "in London, 9.4 per cent. in one-roomed tenements." The overcrowding in one town is proportionally as bad as in the other, and, now that lack of fresh air in sleeping-rooms is fully recognised as so important a factor in lowering vitality and so causing predisposition to disease, we note with alarmed interest that Mr. Rowntree estimates that in an enormous number of houses "the air space is less than 300 cubic feet for each person." To make matters worse, artificial ventilation ceases to be valued as the scale of poverty is descended, for, whereas 10 per cent. of the houses occupied by the superior artisan class were found with open windows on a certain date, only 3 per cent. of the cottages inhabited by the very poor had their windows open on the same night—September 12th, 1900; outside temperature of 50° Fahr. Here, indeed, is missionary work for the district nurse!

The health of the nation depends greatly upon the sanitary condition of its dwellings; it is, therefore, sad to find how much the poor suffer in these so-called enlightened days at the hands of the jerry-builders. Their work is condemned by both our authorities; in York Mr. Rowntree considers that, although intended for persons able to pay a weekly 5s. rent, these dwellings, having "their thin walls of porous and damp-absorbing brick . . . with wood so green" that it will speedily shrink, will soon degenerate into slums, whilst in Mr. Booth's opinion "the demoralising effect of such houses on both occupier and owner is far greater than that of even the worst old property."

In this connection it is interesting to note that in Bath, where there has recently been a clearance of some of the worst slums, houses of a good type being built upon their site, the Medical Officer of Health reports a decided diminution in the cases of phthisis in the new houses as compared with those formerly observed in the old ones.

In the annual report issued by Dr. Newsholme, Medical Officer of Health for the County Borough of Brighton (1903), there is an interesting list of "Instances of Method of Spread of Infection" in cases of consumption, and several of these appear to be examples of "house" or "office infection." It does not require a very vivid imagination to picture the disastrous consequences which will be likely to ensue from a neglected case of phthisis in an overcrowded, unventilated tenement dwelling.

(To be continued).

A Memorial Hospital.

A large number of persons in this country have a great admiration for the work of the late Miss Frances E. Willard, and they will be interested to know that a hospital to cost 75,000dols. is to be erected in Chicago, the physicians of which must use no alcohol in their prescriptions. The hospital will be called the Frances E. Willard National Temperance Hospital. The three schools of practice—regular, homœopathic and eclectic—will be represented on the medical staff.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)