

Medical Matters.

ALCOHOL AND THE FEEBLE-MINDED.

The *British Journal of Inebriety* for January contains an interesting group of papers on "The Relation of Alcohol to Feeble-mindedness," the first being one by Dr. W. A. Potts, late Medical Investigator to the Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-minded, presented to the Society for the Study of Inebriety as an introduction to a discussion on the subject. Dr. Potts stated that the origin of congenital mental defect was nearly always complex, and it was therefore a little difficult to pick out one factor and determine how far its influence extends. That the sort of family history to be found among children in special schools for the mentally defective is the following: Father, phthisical and alcoholic; the father's brother died of phthisis, and an uncle of alcoholism; the mother's mother died at 34 of phthisis, and her father of apoplexy at 48. In another case the record is "a history of insanity in the father's family; the mother is alcoholic and phthisical." In such instances it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the alcoholism could not be blamed for the abnormality, while at the same time it would be open to an extremist to say that alcohol was the deciding factor. In regard to the general action of alcohol, Dr. Potts discusses the action of alcohol and the laws of heredity. He says: "It is a fact that alcohol is a protoplasmic poison; it is absorbed and circulates in the blood, so that any portion of the body may be affected; the generative organs and the germinal cells will not necessarily escape its influence"; also that if alcohol has no actual effect, *per se*, it frequently paves the way for the far-reaching effects of other injurious agencies, such as the absorption of toxins from the alimentary tract. He further discusses the effect of alcoholism in the parents, and proceeds to show that the embryo which is nourished for many months by the mother's blood is exposed to the action of any toxins in her system, that alcohol is certainly carried to the placenta, and that the young and growing tissues are most susceptible to its toxic action.

Another group of scientific workers do not attach such great importance to its evil consequences, because alcohol, in their opinion, is more an eliminator of the unfit than a producer of the unfit. Left to themselves, Dr. Potts says that many of the feeble-minded would soon cease to trouble us; but it is the pride of countries such as ours that natural elimination of the unfit is prevented. We are so careful of the individual, so careless of the

type. In this connection we may reflect that when a toxin finds many victims *in utero* some of those who escape can scarcely have an average mental and physical endowment.

In connection with the effect of alcohol and lactation, Dr. Potts states that there are in most civilised countries a considerable number of mothers who cannot suckle their children, though they genuinely wish to do so. Professor Bunge believes, as the result of investigations conducted on an extensive scale, that the most common cause of this disability is alcoholism in the mother's father, and that where a mother cannot suckle, she usually transmits that defect to the daughters of the next generation. He adds: "I need hardly say that I do not consider artificial infant feeding an essential cause of feeble-mindedness; it merely tends towards degeneracy. At the present time are born a considerable number of potential aments; in the best surroundings they may just hold their own, but with bad conditions of nurture they go under."

Dr. Potts quotes Dr. Dewey, of Chicago, who investigated the early life conditions of 200 sane and 200 insane persons, as quoted by Dr. Urquhart in the Morison lectures, 1907:—"Briefly, whatever tended to eugenics found expression in the sane in a higher degree than the insane. For instance, excessive use of alcohol, of tobacco, of tea, of coffee, appears more frequently in the insane families; tuberculosis, insanity, malarial environment follow the same rule. Neglect and poverty, lack of home discipline, defective schooling, were all more apparent among the insane."

In conclusion, he says: "I would merely say that it appears to me that the evidence is not clear that alcoholism, by itself, in the father will produce amentia; but it is quite plain that, in combination with other bad factors, it is a most unfavourable element, while maternal drinking, and drinking continued through more than one generation, are potent influences in mental degeneracy."

IDENTIFICATION OF TUBERCULOSIS GERMS.

Dr. Randle Rosenberger, a Philadelphia bacteriologist, has described in the *American Journal of Medical Sciences* a method by which tuberculosis germs in the blood of a patient can be identified. After subjecting a specimen to a chemical process, and then preparing a slide, the entire slide is immersed in carbol fuchsin (a red stain) for five minutes. Next it is immersed for five minutes in Papenhims solution (a blue stain), when the whole slide is stained blue with the exception of the tuberculosis germ, which remains red, and is revealed against the blue.

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