

## CONGENITAL SYPHILIS AS A CAUSE OF DEAFNESS.

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The only real safeguard against disease is knowledge. At the twenty-third meeting of the Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases, the Hon. Albinia Brodrick, representing the Irish Association and the National Council of Trained Nurses of Great Britain and Ireland, gave evidence to the effect that the first important step to be taken in fighting these diseases was to spread knowledge with regard to them. In the past nurses had not been properly taught; in the future all nurses should go through some special course of instruction.

With these opinions the writer is in complete agreement, and, as a small contribution towards giving them practical effect, the following account of one way in which syphilis may affect the innocent has been written.

It has been said that there is no disease, not even tuberculosis, more destructive to child life or more disastrous to child health than syphilis. It attacks children before birth and after birth, and the congenital syphilitic child may be said to start "bunkered on the first tee." It brings in its train deafness, blindness, mental defect, epilepsy; it takes a terrible toll of a considerable percentage of children who might otherwise have grown up healthy citizens, useful to the State. If a better knowledge of its ravages only served to prevent the awful examples which occur among children, a great and lasting service would be done for humanity. An infectious disease, due, like many other diseases which are dealt with in a rational way, to a micro-organism, the *spirochæta pallida*, it enters the blood of the parent and is transmitted to the offspring. Children it stunts, dwarfs, kills. Many innocent little ones thus tainted are stillborn, or die within a few months or during the first year, whilst of the survivors many become blind, deaf, or both. Many of the child deaths attributable to the disease occur from meningitis, and it is by meningitis, when it does not end fatally, that it causes brain defects. Deafness may occur before birth, either from pre-natal meningitis extending to the essential nervous apparatus of hearing, or by disease of that apparatus alone. Yet syphilis is a disease very amenable to treatment, and it is only because it is allowed to go

untreated that it is transmitted to the child. It was long ago pointed out that the children who become deaf or blind are those in whom treatment was neglected in infancy.

In order to present only facts to the reader, a concise account will be given of the work done by Dr. Kerr Love, in Glasgow, and by the writer in London. The former is a piece of research which has been somewhat of a revelation to those interested in the deaf child, and has built up a monument for its author of which he may well be proud. Investigating the conditions of the children in the Institutions for the Deaf in Glasgow, he found that nearly all of them came from the poorest class of the community, those who live in a continual state of dangerous overcrowding in their homes. The social status of the families from which they spring is that of the single apartment home, and these show overcrowding to an appalling extent. This overcrowding means untreated syphilis, uncontrolled use of alcohol, and carelessness in the upbringing of children. Consequently the child death-rate is high, and there is a deaf-rate which is never approached in the houses of the well-to-do classes. The damage to hearing occurs before birth, or during the first years of life, and the deafness which results is irreparable.

But it is not in alcoholic excess or overcrowding alone that the cause of this state of things lies hidden, there is some more potent agent at work. Dr. Kerr Love has shown that this factor is to be found in untreated syphilis, largely untreated because the people in this class do not know from what their children are suffering. He has been the first to establish the fact, upon undeniable evidence, that deaf-birth is sometimes due to this disease. It is the only disease which causes deafness in both parent and child; it is at work both before and after birth, and so forms a link between congenital and acquired deafness. From careful investigation, by means chiefly of the Wassermann reaction, a bio-chemical blood test, Dr. Kerr Love has been able to publish the histories of 21 families. In these families there were 172 pregnancies, which resulted in 30 miscarriages, and 112 live births. Among these were 75 deaths (including the 30 premature births), nearly all of which occurred in the first or second years. Thirty-one children were deaf, or blind and deaf, and of the 66 remaining living children, many were born before the poison entered the parental blood. Many of the 66 are not healthy, and more are likely to become unhealthy, because the blood-test showed that the poison was still present. To

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