

## THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SYPHILIS.

A LECTURE DELIVERED TO HEALTH WORKERS AT THE VIROL RESEARCH LABORATORIES ON FEBRUARY 28th, 1918

By A. KNYVETT GORDON, M.B. Cantab.

Formerly Demonstrator of Pathology, St. Mary's Hospital; sometime Lecturer on Infectious Diseases in the University of Manchester.

In my last lecture, after describing the signs and symptoms of syphilis, I pointed out that we had two reliable tests for its presence: we could either search for the microbe itself—the *spirochæta pallida*—in the primary sore (and in the bodies of still-born children who had succumbed in intra-uterine life to the disease), or we could examine the circulating blood of the patient in the secondary and later stages for the presence of specific anti-bodies by the Wassermann reaction. In the laboratory I subsequently showed you the *spirochætes*, and demonstrated the method of performing the Wassermann test. I also pointed out that in the administration of Salvarsan or its allies we had an effective remedy which, when given for a sufficient period, was capable of curing the patient, provided that degenerative changes had not already set in in the nervous system. To-day I am going on to say a few words about the social significance of syphilis.

Firstly, we must have a rough idea of the extent to which it is prevalent in the community, and of the harm it does to the patient. To this end, I cannot do better than refer you to the report of the Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases, from which I have extracted the following facts and estimates:—

- (a) It is estimated (by the Royal Commission) that not less than 10 per cent. of the whole population is infected with syphilis.
- (b) Seventeen per cent. of the insanity of the country, 34 per cent. of all cases of congenital blindness, and 25 per cent. of complete deafness, is due to syphilis; all these cases are absolutely incurable.
- (c) The death-rate amongst people between 35 and 50 who have or have had syphilis is nearly double the average rate.
- (d) Between the same ages, syphilis is the commonest cause of arterial disease. As a man is as old as his arteries, this is a measure of mental deterioration at a time when the skill and experience of the individual is of most use to the State.

- (e) In a series of *apparently healthy* mothers of new-born children in two of the poorer parts of London, signs of syphilis were detected in 19.7 per cent. of those examined by the Wassermann reaction.
- (f) Amongst parents known to be syphilitic, out of 175 pregnancies, 60 per cent. of the children were still-born, and a further 25 per cent. subsequently developed signs of congenital disease. Eighty-five per cent. of children dead or damaged!

It has further been stated that of all cases of syphilis, more than half have been contracted innocently. This includes wives infected by husbands and vice versa, syphilitic children, and cases where the disease has been contracted from towels, cups, and so on, independently of sexual intercourse. This, incidentally, disposes of the statement, often so loosely made, that syphilis is necessarily due to "sin" on the part of the recipient.

The next point is that—as I mentioned last time—we have in the Wassermann reaction a method of diagnosis that is, when properly performed by a skilled pathologist (and not, incidentally, by a laboratory attendant or an orderly) extremely useful, as it enables us to detect the disease without making a physical examination of the patient. Only a little blood is required, which is drawn from a finger prick or a convenient vein, and then sent by post to a laboratory not necessarily situated in the locality of the patient, and under a number only, or other appropriate disguise. Entire secrecy therefore can be assured in the diagnosis. As regards treatment, we can destroy the microbes without affecting the patient, but the most important point is that this should be commenced before the disease has got into the recesses of his nervous system, for then, though the *spirochætes* may perhaps be destroyed, the damage they have done to the delicate nerve cells remains in the form of a disabling scar.

General paralysis of the insane, late epilepsy, the ataxic dragging his weary life through paralysis and pain towards the haven of a welcome death—these are some of the results which can be prevented by early treatment.

Taking these points together, we have, in the case of syphilis, methods which we would give the world to possess in other infectious diseases. Why! Tuberculosis could be stamped out in a decade, and a patient suffering from scarlet fever or whooping cough could probably be rendered free from infection in a week!

By way of impressing the treatment of syphilis on your minds, I show you a cinematographic film illustrating the whole story.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)