

MEMORANDUM ON CANCER.

I.—CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES AND NATURAL COURSE OF CANCER.

We have received from the Ministry of Health a Memorandum on Cancer, intended primarily for the guidance of Local Authorities, prepared by the Departmental Committee on Cancer appointed by the Minister of Health. The Memorandum states that knowledge of some of the main facts of cancer (negative as well as positive) such as are indicated in this Circular—may usefully be spread through the ordinary agencies of public health departments, notably by instruction at welfare centres, by midwives and maternity nurses, and by social welfare workers. Subjoined are some of the principal clauses of the Memorandum.

In this Memorandum the term "Cancer" is applied to a group of morbid conditions known to affect man and lower animals in all parts of the civilised world. The members of this group differ widely in naked eye and microscopical appearances. They also differ in the age of the individuals affected, in the rapidity with which they run their course and in their liability to become generalised throughout the body. But they all agree in that (i) they are manifestations of disordered overgrowth of some tissue of the body, (ii) they are at first local, (iii) they are not encapsuled, (iv) they progressively invade the deeper parts, (v) they readily undergo degenerative changes, (vi) they tend to become disseminated to distant parts of the body, (vii) they lead sooner or later to the death of the individual in the vast majority of cases.

III.—PROCLIVITY TO CANCER.

In a broad sense, liability to cancer is not an attribute of any particular social class, profession or occupation. It is to be inferred, therefore, that the occurrence of cancer depends, to an important degree, on personal predisposing factors. It is right, however, to point out that *hereditary* predisposition to cancer has not at present been proved to be of any practical importance in man; that it cannot be asserted with scientific authority that the use of any particular article of food increases the liability to cancer, or prevents it from appearing; that no known drug or preparation will prevent its appearance, or cure it when present; and that no danger of cancer has been proved to result from inhabiting houses or districts in which cancer happens to have been exceptionally common. There is no evidence to show that cancer is an infectious or contagious disease.

IV.—CHRONIC IRRITATION AS A DETERMINING FACTOR IN THE APPEARANCE OF CANCER.

One certain fact about cancer is that it frequently follows on chronic and prolonged irritation. Not all tissues, however, are equally liable in this respect. The palm of the hand, for example, in spite of its exposure to chronic irritation of all kinds, is probably never the seat of cancer. In the female breast cancer occurs far more commonly in the deeper parts of the gland than in the nipple, which is more exposed to injury. Some tissues show a special liability to develop cancer during chronic irritation, such as the skin of the face, the lips, insides of cheeks, tongue, lower part of the bowel, neck of womb. Certain varieties of chronic irritation, too, are more liable to be followed by cancer than others. Thus, in the lip long continued irritation by a clay pipe is particularly dangerous; in the tongue, irritation by a jagged tooth or badly fitting tooth-plate; in the womb, the chronic ulceration which may follow confinement. Again, syphilitic disease affecting the tongue or female external generative organs, or tuberculosis of skin (lupus) affecting the face, particularly if it has necessitated prolonged treatment, is liable to end in cancer. And lastly, workers in tar such as briquette makers, workers with anilin or paraffin, chimney sweeps, and mule-spinners are apt to suffer from cancer in special parts of the body as a consequence of repeated irritation by the particular agent concerned.

This liability of cancer to follow chronic irritation of so many different types is remarkable, and leads to the supposition that beneath them all there lies some common factor—as yet unrecognised—which is fundamental to the passage of a chronic inflammatory and non-cancerous condition into one that is definitely cancerous. In one variety of cancer (rodent ulcer) the distribution of the new growth is such that it suggests a close relationship with the nerve supply of the affected part. How far this is true and how far modifications of the body itself as distinguished from the chronic irritant play a part in the ultimate production of the cancer it is impossible to say in our present state of knowledge.

V.—PROPHYLAXIS.

While considerations such as those in III above show how far we are from being able to say how cancer is to be avoided, those in IV indicate that there are at least some provocative causes of cancer which can be guarded against. Since cancer occurs more commonly in certain sites, it is prudent to notice and

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