

THE PUBLIC HEALTH.

ON THE STATE OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH.

Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer of the Ministry of Health for the Year 1932.

The Annual Report of Sir George Newman, K.C.B., M.D., F.R.C.P., etc., Chief Medical Officer of the Ministry of Health, is full of matters of the utmost importance and interest.

Unemployment and National Health.

"There is one public issue of paramount importance," Sir George Newman declares, "upon which it may be reasonably supposed (a supposition not wholly justifiable on account of incompleteness of data necessary to valid conclusions) that some light might be cast by vital statistics—namely, the effect of prolonged economic depression and widespread unemployment upon the public health, and it is desirable that some observations should be made upon the subject. It is common knowledge that this problem affects the whole civilised world and involves many millions of persons, both the unemployed proper and their dependents, but here it is only appropriate to refer to England and Wales.

"In estimating the effect of widespread unemployment on the physical condition of the people there are a number of factors which must be considered. In the first place there is the direct effect on the unemployed individual and his dependents, and in the second there is the indirect effect of its prevalence on the physical well-being, and even on the minds, of employed workers (through fear of unemployment or otherwise) and the population generally, whether employed or not.

The Harmful Effect of Unemployment.

"Again, the harmful effect of unemployment on its victim may be exercised in various ways. For instance: (a) the actual deprivation of an adequate diet; (b) the effect of resultant idleness on a manual worker in rendering him unfit to resume his former occupation owing to lack of practice and loss of muscle tone; (c) the effect of worry and anxiety in impairing normal bodily functions, e.g., on digestion or in aggravating existing states of mental instability and thereby engendering various forms of neuroses; or (d) actual excessive sickness or incapacity. In such a situation there is, of course, much which can never be either analysed or tabulated, and we have to be guided by the broad facts as represented in sickness and mortality.

"As a matter of fact, the surest of all tests of grave results are the mortality returns. Any long sustained physical pressure or stress of serious degree represents itself ultimately in a rise in mortality, particular or general. Here we have a long continuing experience of unemployment gradually becoming more acute until the present time, yet the mortality of the country as a whole, with few exceptions, and even of many of the depressed areas themselves, has been uniformly decreasing. Nor have we any evidence of increased morbidity.

"Of two facts we may be sure. First there is taking place a great improvement in the physical condition and health of the people—life is longer and its physical character is better than in former centuries in England. Secondly, we possess, for better or worse, a more sensitive humanitarianism for human pain and distress than formerly, and fuller means of expressing it... Nor is there any general increase of mortality among the unemployed themselves and their dependents, or even in the depressed areas as a whole."

A more heartening statement from so responsible an authority could not be made.

Maternity and Child Welfare.

Of the important section on "Maternity and Child Welfare," which Sir George Newman describes as "one of the vital and living public health services, a service which appeals to the imagination and sympathy of all classes of the community," we hope to deal at greater length in a future issue than is now possible.

The Relation of Food to Health and Disease.

NUTRITION.

Of special interest to nurses is the important chapter on "The Relation of Food to Health and Disease."

In this connection Sir George Newman says:—

"Progress continues to be recorded in the investigation and elucidation of the problems of nutrition, but as fresh knowledge accumulates the complexity of the subject becomes increasingly apparent. This complexity is inherent in its very nature. *The science of nutrition*, like hygiene itself, is no mere body of rigid doctrine which can be settled once and for all time. It comprises social as well as scientific aspects, and involves racial and national customs and practices, and the availability of food. It is an expression of life, mobile and changeable as life itself. Interest is at present concentrated chiefly on the study of the accessory elements in nutrition and their relationship to one another and on various forms of disease or physical impairment. All men are agreed that nutrition is the basis of individual and national health.

"Twenty years ago in my annual report to the Board of Education on the health of school children I drew attention to the fact that *Human Nutrition* connoted a complex rather than a simple condition of things. It is true that for the nourishment of the body there must be food, but that is not enough. There must indeed be sufficiency, and the suitability of food is even more vital—a proper proportion of nutrients, protein, fat, carbohydrate, vitamin and mineral constituents.

"Yet over and above this other factors must receive attention. For example, regard must be paid

"(a) to times and seasons for food, to its cookery and preparation, to its appropriate adaptation to age and sex, to its cost and availability, to the social and domestic environment of the consumer;

"(b) to the relation of beverages to solid food;

"(c) to the growth, repair, energy and heat requirements of the individual body, which means in practice an intimate relation to age, habit, leisure and occupation—an infant, a school child, an adolescent, a sedentary clerk, a trained athlete, a labouring navvy—for they need different dietaries, and the suitability and value of their diet is affected by fresh air and bodily exercise, by activity and bodily rest; and above all

"(d) to the physiological condition of the body—the physiological processes of mastication, digestion, absorption, assimilation, metabolism and excretion.

"Healthy and complete nutrition is therefore something infinitely wider than mere feeding or filling of the stomach, mere stoking of an engine. It requires a healthy body, or at least a receptive and responding body; it needs a clean alimentary tract; it needs a brain and nervous regulation in tone as well as a healthy muscular and digestive system, a sound circulatory system as well as a normal lymphatic system. It is part of the sum total of sound physiological being. It is because of this complex that nutrition is difficult of attainment, or its reverse, malnutrition, difficult of measurement."

"The Army canteens during the War, the industrial canteens in factories, the improved dietaries in hospitals, sanatoria, and poor law institutions, the enormous development of the catering trade and the manufacture of prepared foods, the ever widening public medical services,

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