

THE PUBLIC HEALTH.

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER OF THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH.

The Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer of the Ministry of Health is always a most interesting and important document, and that by Sir Arthur MacNalty, Chief Medical Officer, recently published by the Stationery Office, for the year 1935, has many important and interesting features.

New and Wider Interpretation of Preventive Medicine.

The Report points out that "the advances in public health made during the reign of King George V have gradually brought all agencies for promoting national health into closer and more helpful accord," and that the dividing line between preventive and curative medicine, where it has not actually disappeared, grows fainter and fainter. The wide range of preventive medicine to-day is exemplified by the number and variety of the public health and medical subjects dealt with in the Report.

It is much that more and more we are coming to realise the importance of recognising early any departures from the normal, so that these may be dealt with and perhaps cured at their most hopeful stage. Especially is this true with regard to cancer, which, though no cure has yet been found, yet if recognised and dealt with in the early stages, in many cases never recurs, and the patient eventually dies of some other disease; and to insanity, which formerly did not receive institutional treatment until it was certifiable, and therefore much more difficult of and unresponsive to cure. Now there are institutions with uncertified sections, to which patients go for treatment much more readily and, therefore, in the earlier and more curable stages, frequently avoiding altogether the stigma of certification; and further outpatient clinics are attached to general hospitals, where in even earlier stages of the disease patients go freely and willingly for advice and treatment from physicians expert in mental diseases. It is surely sound sense and treatment that this should be so, and must have an appreciable and beneficial effect on the public health.

Vital Statistics.

In 1935 there was a rise of only 1,114 births over the number registered in 1934, representing a fall in the birth-rate of 0.1 from last year, the respective rates being 14.8 per 1,000 living for 1934, as against 14.7 for 1935. This is, however, 0.3 above the 1933 rate, which was the lowest recorded.

The five principal certified causes of death at all ages arranged in order of magnitude were the same as last year and occur in the same order, viz: (1) Diseases of the heart and circulatory system; (2) Cancer (malignant diseases); (3) Bronchitis, pneumonia and other respiratory diseases; (4) Diseases of the nervous system; (5) All forms of tuberculosis.

Tuberculosis takes third instead of fifth place in a similar list for the ages 15-65—the years of working life.

The deaths of children under one year of age fell from 59 to 57 per 1,000 births, representing a saving of 925 infant lives as compared with the figure for 1934, which was, up to then, the lowest on record. Had the infant mortality rate observed in 1901-10 prevailed till 1935 the expected number of deaths would have been more than double the actual. The mortality rates for the first five years of life also continue to decline.

Changes in Age Distribution of Population.

The change towards a rise in the average age of the population, noted in previous reports, has continued. Since the beginning of the century the proportion of per-

sons under 25 years has fallen by nearly 25 per cent., and since 1931 at a rate almost double the average rate between that year and 1901. On the other hand, the changes towards increase are marked in the older age groups—especially the old-middle-age group (45-65 years) and the old-age group. The reasons for these changes are two: (1) the fall in the birth-rate, which reduces the proportion of young lives; and (2) the fall in the general death-rate, which increases the proportions in the older groups. If, as appears likely, the change in age distribution continues, it is possible that it will eventually lead to some regrouping of health services and reallocation of expenditure according to altered needs.

Epidemic Diseases.

Of the epidemic diseases it is good to learn that there has been a decline in the incidence of cerebro-spinal fever, encephalitis lethargica ("sleepy sickness"), scarlet fever, smallpox and tuberculosis. The fall in the death-rate from measles at ages under 15 years is very remarkable when compared with former times, declining from 1,635 per 1,000,000 in 1896 to 143 per 1,000,000 in 1935. The decline has been accelerated since the child welfare services came into being. Details are given of the use of convalescent serum, adult serum and placental extract in the prevention of measles.

The Section on epidemic diseases ends with an account of a peculiar and interesting disease known commonly as "pink disease," but also under various other names, which mainly affects young children under four years of age. The main features of the disease have been tersely summarised as "pain, pink, peeling, prostration, paraesthesia, perspiration." The mortality is not high and with proper care should not exceed 5 per cent.

Venereal Diseases.

The decline in the incidence of syphilis, noted in the last report, has continued, and there has also been a steady fall since 1930 in the number of cases under 15 years of age of congenital syphilis dealt with at the centres. The cases of gonorrhoea dealt with for the first time showed a further decrease in 1935, and the figure relating to males was the lowest since 1926. Laboratory assistance is of great value in the diagnosis of venereal disease, and 712,406 pathological specimens were examined under the Venereal Disease Scheme in the approved laboratories and centres.

It is indeed good news that these terrible diseases, so far-reaching in their results, are on the decrease, but one has only to walk down any London street to realise that much still needs to be done to combat these scourges.

PLANS FOR IMPROVING THE HEALTH OF THE NATION.

The Government's plans for improving the health of the nation will be made known in a Bill which will be introduced this Session, but not necessarily on an early date, since legislation is not required immediately. The Government, as Mr. Chamberlain indicated in his recent speech at Birmingham, intend to provide for proper facilities for recreation and trained scientific instructors. They hope to make the fullest use of local authority and voluntary organisations which have already done a great deal of useful work.

RAW MILK.

We wonder why anyone consumes unboiled milk, epidemics are so often traced to its source. On inquiry into the recent outbreak of scarlet fever at Doncaster, all the patients had consumed raw milk from the same source, and it is reported that a milker on the farm in question had been found to be suffering from illness which was probably of scarlatinal origin.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)