

## THE STATE OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH DURING SIX YEARS OF WAR.

### REPORT OF THE CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER OF THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH, 1939-1945.

The Ministry of Health published a Report\* by the Chief Medical Officer, Sir Wilson Jameson, "On the State of the Public Health during Six Years of War." The Report is the first to be submitted by the Chief Medical Officer since 1939, and covers the period up to the end of the war. In his introduction, Sir Wilson Jameson says:

"Its pages tell of the state of the public health and of the medical work of the Ministry of Health during the trials, the mercies, the efforts and final triumphs of six years of the grimmest struggle Britain has endured since the Conquest. Therein are described the new services, and the extensions of existing services, which have arisen to fulfil great needs, long felt indeed but intensified by total war—services which may well form the foundation and foreshadow the pattern of the National Health Service that is to come. That, after these six years of unprecedented strain alike upon the Nation and upon the medical resources of the realm, the state of the public health should be as good as it is to-day is indeed a miracle. . . . Most of the facts and figures need no interpreter—they speak for themselves, some of nation-wide efforts and achievements of which we may all be proud, and some of new methods of diagnosis, new methods of treatment, new remedies of unequalled potency and new insecticides of unique efficiency."

#### Absence of Serious Epidemics.

One of the striking features of the report is its revelation of the nation's great good fortune during the war years in escaping serious outbreaks of illnesses of various kinds. Summarising the position, Sir Wilson Jameson says, "There has been no serious epidemic save that of *cerebro-spinal fever*, of which the incidence far exceeded that in the 1914-18 war. The reduced case mortality of the past five years in this disease implies that the new methods of treatment have been the means of saving some 15,000 lives. One salient fact has been the increase in *infective jaundice*, alike in troops and civilians in this country and in the Army on the various fronts. To investigate this prevalence a Jaundice Committee was appointed by the Medical Research Council.

"In six winters, three of which were severe, two short epidemics of *influenza* occurred; both were of comparatively mild type. *Typhoid fever* in 1944 was less prevalent than in any pre-war year. . . . There has been a large increase in the notifications of—but little in the mortality from—*dysentery*."

#### Progress in Diphtheria Immunisation.

Diphtheria cases and deaths declined each year following the start of the Ministry's Immunisation Campaign. "In 1944 diphtheria deaths were less than one third of the pre-war average and the number of cases notified was 30,000 below the pre-war average and 6,000 lower than the previous low record. Nevertheless, it is a sad reflection that in this country during the war far more children under 15 were killed by this preventable disease than by enemy bombs. Strong, continuous effort is needed to raise the general percentage of immunised children to at least 75, especially in the pre-school groups, and to maintain by re-inoculation at suitable intervals the state of resistance of children who have received primary immunisation."

#### Scabies Increase Intensified by War.

Scabies has been increasing since 1930. "During the war, helped by overcrowding, shortage of houses, evacua-

tion and shifting of workers, it rose to epidemic heights. Treatment by benzyl benzoate emulsion has proved remarkably efficient."

#### Successful Precautions Against Imported Diseases.

War increases the risks of imported diseases, but here again the worst fears have not been realised. "A special watch has been kept upon the danger of the importation of *typhus* and so far there have been no cases other than a small number occurring among laboratory workers in which the infection was contracted in this country. A few have also occurred among returning prisoners of war and among the medical students who did such splendid work at Belsen Camp. Although thousands of Service men have returned to this country from malarious places, the cases of *malaria* infected in this country were extremely few. The danger that smuggling by returning Servicemen of dogs may introduce *rabies* into England is a very real one."

#### Encouraging Prospect in Fight Against Tuberculosis.

A disquieting increase in deaths from tuberculosis in 1939 to 1941 was followed by a resumption of the pre-war downward trend, and the 1944 figures showed a new low figure. "The prospect in the field of tuberculosis" says the Report, "is now encouraging. Since the initiation of mass miniature radiography and of the allowances scheme, ascertainment of the disease has been accelerated and there is already evidence that patients are coming for treatment at an earlier stage of their illness. . . . The outstanding difficulty is the staffing of enough beds to meet the needs of the next few years. Until pasteurisation of milk becomes universal throughout the country, the most readily preventable forms of tuberculosis . . . will continue to cause suffering and death among large numbers of children."

#### Recommendations on Rheumatism and Cancer.

Rheumatism and cancer have been considered by Sub-Committees of the Minister's Medical Advisory Committee, and recommendations have been made.

*Acute rheumatism* continues to decline, but there is a shortage of beds for the prevention of rheumatic heart disease in children in many parts of the country.

*Chronic rheumatism*, "the cause of much chronic disablement in this country," is to be the subject of an extended attack, for which arrangements are being made.

Regional schemes for the diagnosis and treatment of cancer have been discussed and some have come into being.

The discovery by Professor Dodds that stilboestrol has a beneficial effect on cancer of the prostate is an event of great importance.

#### Anæmia Investigation.

*Anæmia* was specially investigated by the Medical Research Council from 1942 onwards. Though there was less anæmia in some groups in the later than in the earlier part of the war, there is still an undue amount of preventable anæmia, among infants and young children, expectant mothers, housewives, and some occupational groups.

#### Measures to Combat Venereal Diseases.

This war, like others, brought an increase of venereal diseases. "In England and Wales, social conditions, particularly favoured the spread of venereal diseases and, broadly speaking, there was an increase in early syphilis (counting civilians treated in treatment centres and infections of British Servicemen stated to have been contracted in this country) of about 140 per cent. over the figure for 1939; in 1944 there was a slight decline." There are greater difficulties in estimating the incidence of gonorrhœa, but it is estimated that "the increase in this disease was not so great; that it reached a peak in 1942, when it was probably about 86 per cent. higher than in 1939; and that in 1944 . . . the percentage increase declined to about 35."

\* On the State of the Public Health During Six Years of War. H.M. Stationery Office, York House, Kingsway, W.C.2. Price 5s., post free 5s. 4d.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)