

THE STERILIZATION
OF DEGENERATES

By H. C. SHARP, M. D., Physician
INDIANA REFORMATORY



The Sterilization of Degenerates

In treating upon this subject there must ever be borne in mind the distinct understanding that degeneracy is a defect, and that a defect differs from a disease in that it cannot be cured. To elucidate, if a child is born with but one eye, this is a defect and all of the skill in the world cannot correct it, while, if a child is born with gonorrhoeal conjunctivitis, this is a disease and by the proper course of treatment can be cured. Now, degeneracy is the term applied when there is something lacking in the mental or nervous construction.

There is no longer any questioning of the fact that the degenerate class is increasing out of all proportion to the increase of the general population. This is clearly shown by the fact that at each session of our legislature there are ever increasing demands for the enlarging of the institutions we have and for the erection of new institutions for the detention of this class.

Most of the insane, the epileptic, the imbecile, the idiotic, the sexual perverts; many of the confirmed inebriates, pros-

titutes, tramps and criminals, as well as the habitual paupers found in our county poor asylums; also many of the children in our orphan homes belong to the class known as degenerates.

For some of the above mentioned there exist provisions for their custody, but in many cases it is but temporary and frequently the inmates propogate while thus detained. In many states, and in Indiana until very recently, even marriage has been permitted in our county poor asylums. In addition to all this there are many unfit who are allowed to go about at will, and at the present time there is no provision by which they can be restrained.

The medical profession has done much in the way of developing preventive medicine, but few and feeble have been its efforts in searching out and applying remedies to check the growth of degeneracy in our country. For this condition to go on unchecked eventually means a weakening of our nation. It is as Herbert Spencer once said, "To be a good animal is the first requisite to success in life, and to be a nation of good animals is the first condition to national prosperity.

We have spent thousands of dollars and years of time in advancing the best methods of breeding live stock to enrich the resources of our county, and this science has been developed by the

breeders of the country to a point of almost perfection. Yet, realizing as we do that the very life of our nation is its manhood and womanhood, we have done practically nothing in the way of providing a means by which we may beget none but sound offspring and thus establish a nation physically and mentally strong.

Without a doubt, in more than fifty percent of all cases of developed insanity we find such evidence of ancestral defect as would lead us to expect at some point along the line of descent a reappearance of this or some other form of degeneracy. This is relatively true of all the forms of mental or nervous defects. If every intelligent man and woman was fully alive to the fact that the alliance with such ancestral lines is fraught with danger of the gravest type and the awful responsibility of imposing such hereditary taints upon the offspring I believe that it would be but a very short time until there would be such laws in every state as would largely control this condition.

Restricting propagation seems to be universally agreed upon as necessary for the relief of this condition. The difficulty lies in deciding upon the proper method to bring about this restriction. Some have advocated the education of public opinion so that those who are from defective parentage shall, in the

face of such public opinion, abstain from marriage. This, to me, is even worse than absurd, for I believe that we shall never be able to bring about such conditions as will prevent the practice of sexual intercourse and if this is true the result would be that, while there might be fewer marriages, there would be more bastards.

Restrictive legislation is another means that has been advocated, and many states have passed marriage laws for the purpose of regulating this condition. Minnesota has a law providing that no woman under the age of forty-five years, or a man of any age, except he marry a woman over forty-five years of age, either of whom is epileptic, imbecile, feeble-minded, or afflicted with insanity, shall intermarry or marry any other person within the bounds of the state. Michigan, Delaware, Connecticut, New Jersey and North Dakota have also passed laws for the purpose of preventing marriage among defectives, but unfortunately matrimony is not always necessary to propagation, and the tendency of these several different laws is to restrict procreation only among the more moral and intelligent class, while the most undesirable class goes on reproducing its kind, the only difference being that illegitimacy is added to the degeneracy, and thus the children enter upon life's battle doubly handicapped.

Dr. R. W. Bruce Smith, of Toronto, in writing upon this subject asks, "What avails the continuous increase of hospitals, asylums, and similar institutions if the number to occupy them grows faster than the accommodations? How can we possibly leave the world better for our work if we do not, at least, begin some action to stop this vicious stream at its fountain head?" And then he suggests the following: "Those who have faithfully and patiently wrestled with this perplexing problem have concluded that the only course to be taken is to separate all true degenerates from society and keep them by themselves in carefully classified groups, under circumstances which will insure that they shall do as little harm to themselves and their fellows as possible, and that they shall not entail upon the next generation the burden which the present one has borne." This method of segregation would necessitate the expenditure of enormous sums of money to establish and maintain colonies or industrial refuges which, I believe, would be a disappointment in the end. It would necessarily be a condition of restraint and unless safely guarded as an actual prison there would be many escapes and, in their effort to escape detection, these unfortunates would naturally realize that they could not engage in legitimate trade, and

therefore would resort to crime, becoming a further menace to society. Again, this method means life imprisonment for a large army of men and women who should be given the opportunity to enjoy life and liberty.

Castration is another means that has been suggested for the purpose of preventing procreation in the unfit. A superintendent of the Kansas Feeble-Minded Institution thus operated upon forty-eight boys in that institution about the year 1898. He has since severed his connection with the institution and if there has been any further report of his work I know nothing of it. This subject is, as I have repeatedly stated, of too much gravity and causes entirely too much mental and nervous disturbance to ever become popular or justifiable as a medical measure, but there is one operation that I heartily endorse as an additional punishment in certain offenses. It can readily be seen that one subjected to castration would in all probability become very morose and downcast on account of the deformity alone, and besides, the testicle has a double function, that of an internal as well as an external secretion and the organism can not maintain a normal condition when robbed of this internal secretion. This is manifested by the perceptible change in the eunuch.

Since October, 1899, I have been performing an operation known as vasectomy, which consists of ligating and resecting a small portion of the vas deferens. This operation is indeed very simple and easy to perform, I do it without administering an anesthetic either general or local. It requires about three minutes' time to perform the operation and the subject returns to his work immediately, suffers no inconvenience, and is in no way impaired for his pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness, but is effectively sterilized. I have been doing this operation for nine full years. I have two-hundred and thirty-six cases that have afforded splendid opportunity for post operative observation and I have never seen any unfavorable symptom. There is no atrophy of the testicle, there is no cystic degeneration, there is no disturbed mental or nervous condition following, but, on the contrary, the patient becomes of a more sunny disposition, brighter of intellect, ceases excessive masturbation, and advises his fellows to submit to the operation for their own good. And here is where this method of preventing procreation is so infinitely superior to all others proposed—that it is endorsed by the subjected persons. All the other methods proposed place restrictions and, therefore, punishment upon the subject; this method absolutely

does not. There is no expense to the State, no sorrow or shame to the friends of the individual as there is bound to be in the carrying out of the segregation idea.

There is a law providing for the sterilization of defectives in effect in Indiana and it is being carried out at the Indiana Reformatory. I regret very much that it is not being followed up in the other institutions of the state, but there is no doubt that it will come about in a very short time. This law reads as follows:

A Bill for an Act, entitled an act to prevent procreation of confirmed criminals, idiots, imbeciles, and rapists; providing that superintendents and boards of managers of institutions where such persons are confined shall have the authority and are empowered to appoint a committee of experts, consisting of two (2) physicians to examine into the mental condition of such inmates.

Whereas, Heredity plays a most important part in the transmission of crime, idiocy and imbecility;

Therefore, Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Indiana, That on and after the passage of this act it shall be compulsory for each and every institution in the State, entrusted with the care of confirmed criminals, idiots, rapists, and imbeciles to appoint upon its staff, in addition to the regular institutional physician, two (2) skilled surgeons of recognized ability, whose duty it shall be, in conjunction with the chief physician of the Institution to examine the mental and physical condition of such inmates as are recommended by the institutional physician and board of managers. If, in the judgment of this committee of experts and the board of managers, procreation is inadvisable and there is no probability of improvement of the mental and physical condition of the inmate, it shall be lawful for the surgeons to perform such operation for the prevention of procreation as shall be decided safest and most effective. But this operation shall not be performed except in cases that have been pronounced unimprovable: Provided, That in no case shall the consultation fee be more than three (3) dollars to each expert, to be paid out of the funds appropriated for the maintenance of such institution.

This is indeed a very long step in the right direction and will never be rescinded for the simple reason that it is right, just to all, and humane. I would, however, carry it a little further and make the provision in our marriage laws that when one or both contracting parties suffer from a defect or a chronic, transmissible disease the male should be sterilized. Then let them go on and marry and by this means there will possibly be a support given and a protectorate thrown about some feeble minded woman that in any other event would become a public charge, or a prostitute, or, more than likely, the mother of illegitimate children. Under the provisions of the above quoted law women may be subjected to sterilization methods as well as men. The operation on women is almost as simple for it consists of simply ligating the fallopian tube.

Dr. Rentoul, of Liverpool, has given no little thought to this subject and has contributed more than any one else to the literature on this question. He advocated that sterilization by the above named methods should be authorized by law.

Sir John McDougall, chairman of the Asylum Committee, London County Council, has said: "Some day we shall come to the conclusion that some physical means should be employed to pre-

vent the unfit from producing children.”

Earl Russell, of London, said: “I think it admits of little doubt that if the ruling classes in the country, in Parliament, and in the law were composed entirely of people of adequate medical knowledge, some such remedy as this suggested would soon become a law of the land.”

Dr. Bernardo left on record these words: “Some step will have to be taken in the near future if we are to protect the nation at large from a large addition of the most enfeebled, vicious, and degenerate type.”

Dr. Bevan Lewis, of England, says: “Nothing short of such radical means can stem the tide of degeneracy.”

“Dr. Barr, in his work, “Mental Defectives”, says: Let asexualization be once legalized, not as a penalty for crime, but a remedial measure preventing crime and tending to future comfort and happiness of the defective; let the practice once become common for young children immediately upon being adjudged defective by competent authority properly appointed, and the public mind will accept it as an effective means of race preservation. It would come to be regarded, just as quarantine, simple protection against ill.”

Quotations such as the above, backed up by an existing law in Indiana, absolutely in line with the advocacy of the

most eminent physicians not only in America, but of England, should at least give courage to others that are interested in the purity of the race.

NOTE: I have quoted from R. W. Bruce Smith's article on "Mental Sanitation" in some instances.—H. C. Sharp, M. D., Indiana Reformatory, Jeffersonville.



