

NY State Med J 1907 V-7

### RACE SUICIDE.\*

By CHAS. E. LOW, M.D.,  
PULASKI, N. Y.

**T**HERE is no class of people so abundantly able to appreciate the blessing of a family of children as that great class who already have them; and yet all these may not readily agree with our strenuous Mr. Roosevelt concerning the danger of race suicide in its effect on the ultimate condition of our body politic.

It is no doubt true that a large percentage of our parentage is more and more made up of a class of people who are the least assimilable in our form of free government, and that their children will, as a result of such parentage, be less likely to appreciate the spirit of our institutions. This is particularly so as the influence of our native stock becomes less and less felt, on account of the decreasing number of children in our typically American families. Nevertheless, these factors may be compensated for by making the quality of our small truly American families make up for the quantity of the larger ones, thus affording leaders of thought and action to maintain our ideals.

The great pity is, that those persons who are bound together by the ties of holy matrimony without enjoying the blessings of fatherhood and motherhood cannot appreciate the loss of that full measure of happiness to be realized in the mutual affection of parents and children, nor do they realize the cohesive power of parental and filial affection which offers such a bulwark against domestic infelicity and divorce. How many parents have been, aye, how many parents will be, led to overlook frailties in one or the other through mutual love for, and interest in, their offspring, and how many of these offenders would have drifted wider and wider apart had it not been for this bond of mutual love? From the time of the prattling child on one's

knee to that of the self-reliant adult ready to share his strength with that of our declining years, there has been continually an altar of devotion at which misapprehensions and doubts could be forgotten in the instinctive love for offspring. What a host of half-orphans have inspired in the surviving parents lives of sublime heroism in their devotion to their children, and this, too, when no other motive could have made life tolerable.

And yet, despite the cogency of these facts, there is a constantly increasing class of people who thrust aside parenthood as a calamity to be dreaded like a plague; and, although it is not the purpose of this paper to try to completely analyze the various causes which lead up to this condition, we must review some of them in order to reach an intelligent understanding of why it exists.

However much the existence of such a condition is to be deprecated, there is no evading it as a fact, and if there is to be a class of married people who will not accept the pleasure and responsibility of parenthood, let us inquire if there is anything ethically wrong in its prevention, and if not, instruct them as to the best scientific means of avoiding it and as to the danger incurred in the current practices used for that purpose.

To do this the matter must be spoken of in plain terms, and we will premise our further argument by the old adage that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," wishing thereby to call attention to the fearful results of interrupting pregnancy, as evidenced by the current reports in the daily press detailing the death of the victim and the criminal prosecution of the operator, a combination of disaster and crime only equalled in its awfulness by the moral perversion which prompted the act of unnecessarily destroying a potential human life. The term potential is used advisedly, for as soon as conception has taken place there begins the growth of an organism which from the start exists as a multicellular entity having more or less independent functions of its own, and barring accidents or intended interference causing death, becomes at birth the living human being.

The gratification of sexual desire is a normal instinct of all the higher orders of animal life directed towards the perpetuation of species, and so long as it is kept within reasonable bounds is as salutary as any other organic function. In man the practice must be governed by the individual reason, and like the well-nigh universal demand for some form of stimulant, it can in a measure be regulated, but not prohibited.

With the sexual desire incorporated as a part of man's existence, its gratification follows as surely as taking food follows hunger; but as nature evidently has not designed that every act of copulation should be followed by

\*Read before the Semi-Annual Meeting of the Oswego County Medical Society, May 21, 1907.

conception, is it unreasonable to suppose that man is sometimes warranted in applying both his reason and art to prevent it? If man's mind was given him to raise him above the brute creation, is there any offense against law or morals in letting him exercise his faculty of reason in controlling his procreative function any more than in regulating his sleeping or eating? and is there any greater crime against nature involved in the prevention of conception than in remedying the overloaded stomach of some gourmand with a digestant, or the sleepless night of some debauchee with an hypnotic?

There is no denying the fact that up to the present time the medical profession as a body has evaded the issue, while some of its individual members have in certain instances advised in a half-hearted way methods of unknown or doubtful efficiency. The prevention of conception is either right or wrong, and should be recommended or denounced on a basis of scientific fact, rather than on one of sentimental tradition.

It may be argued that the fear of conception prevents the ruin of many a young woman, but, if chastity is promoted solely by the fear of conception, it loses the major part of its ethical value, because such fear eliminates the doing of right for right's sake; and if chastity is once violated it would seem infinitely better that conception should be prevented rather than that woman and abortionist should be involved in a moral and legal crime by destroying a possible life.

I apprehend that there is a relatively small proportion of married people who avoid the responsibilities of parenthood because of any antipathy to children as such; and I assume, on the other hand, that there is a relatively large proportion who do so on account of the desire to shirk the annoyance and responsibility of bringing up children under the strenuous conditions of modern society, not so much because it will restrict or prohibit their participation in social functions, for after all most parents are not what may be called society people, as because they fear that they can not maintain themselves and clothe and educate their children in accordance with the demands of modern social conditions. This also leads many young people to avoid matrimony and to resort to illicit sexual intercourse, resulting perhaps in bastardy or the contraction of contagious venereal diseases, while others contract various habits of personal sexual irregularity from the effects of either of which they suffer through life. Any influence which operates to prevent the organization of even small families should not be lost sight of in its effect on the body politic, for it is through the lack of family ties that men and women are more and more coming into fierce industrial competition. Nor will any amount of argument induce

these young people to embark in matrimony with the possibility of a large family, for we all realize the practical necessity of conforming to instituted standards of living, and logic cannot make the bare feet and calico dresses of two generations ago take the place of the shoes and silks of to-day, even though they served their purpose quite as well, because present standards of civilization are governing forces which will not permit the old customs.

If sexual intercourse cannot be prohibited what is to be said in defence of allowing parenthood to occur as a menace to society among those who will transmit hereditary temperamental or physical defects which will woefully handicap or perhaps utterly destroy their progeny. Nor should we overlook the baneful effects often seen by the medical man in large families where the mother's physical forces have become so exhausted by frequent child-bearing that she has fallen an easy victim to septic or tubercular infections, ending in death or worse, and whose children pass through life handicapped with the physical infirmities inherited from a mother unfit for producing offspring, and with that great lack of parental care which must be determined by the mother's physique and the demands of the rest of the family.

Who can demonstrate by any argument based upon reason that in certain cases, and under the advice of the physician, one or all of these conditions before alluded to are not sufficient reason for the prevention of conception? Nor can I see that such prevention offers any crime against ethics or the State, for it must be conceded that the destruction of either the unfertilized ovum of the female, or the spermatozoon of the male, before coalescence or conception has occurred, cannot be construed as depriving a *fœtus* of existence, else it would be a crime for every continent male to have a seminal emission or for every virtuous female to discharge an unfertilized ovum during the process of menstruation, because some human agency did not supervene to place the two living cells under proper conditions to reproduce a human entity.

No amount of theorizing on the evils of race suicide will destroy current practices for the prevention of conception, and despite the statute forbidding it condoms continue to be sold, even though they often lend but a sense of false security. Perhaps a more modern method is the use of the so-called "whirling spray" syringe, which attempts to cleanse the vaginal tract of all spermatozoa by aqueous irrigation, but this must have its percentage of failures, because the semen is not readily soluble in water, and portions containing live spermatozoa may remain in the vagina. Probably the most current practice used is that of onanism, or withdrawal of the male organ of generation before coitus is completed.

It would seem that any method which was equally certain in its results, and which would obviate this pernicious practice, should have the endorsement of both law and morals, for I think that the consensus of medical opinion will bear me out in the statement that this practice has resulted in more nervous, mental and physical wrecks, and that in its ultimate results has disrupted more families than almost any other factor pertaining to sexual congress. On account of the intimate relation through reflex nervous centers, the whole organism is more profoundly affected by irregularities in the operation of the sexual apparatus than by those of any other portion of the body, and there is little doubt but that the continuance of this practice unknowingly renders the female averse to cohabitation through failure of complete gratification, and the male, after experiencing the same failure and also meeting marital rebuffs or indifference, is perhaps directed to illicit intercourse where he contracts venereal disease, or learns to his mortification and sorrow that he has acquired a habit of premature ejaculation which is drifting rapidly towards absolute impotence. It is barely possible too that the female drifts into the realm of a man more fortunate in his sexual functions, and there learns the complete gratification of nature's instituted desire, with the result of a wrecked home and a social scandal.

If we are right in the conclusion that the prevention of a conception is justified by the preponderance of good over evil which will result from the scientific practice under the direction of the medical profession, then let us devote our attention to some efficient means of accomplishing this end, which it would seem might be done by finding a solvent for the viscid seminal fluid, thus allowing the destruction of the spermatozoa by contact with some substance inimical to their life; both solvent and destroyer to be susceptible of aqueous solution so that the solution could be readily prepared and used in some efficient form of vaginal irrigator directly after sexual intercourse.

Let us also encourage the spread of a belief that is justly becoming more and more prevalent, which is that the responsibility as between parent and child is rather of the parent to the child than the reverse. In days gone by we only heard of the child's responsibility to the parent, without any seeming acknowledgment of what it meant to bring children into the world or regard for the qualities they inherited or the necessity of provision for their future. Less attention was paid to parent stock, prenatal influences or other conditions affecting the well-being of the child than was given to the breeding of our domestic animals. The main idea of the mutual relation was that the child should obey ironclad rules as made

by the parent, and quite overlooked the fact that there is no animal organism born into the world that is so late in reaching maturity or so dependent on its progenitors until reaching that state.

The population of the globe is no doubt increasing fast enough, and it would seem in accord with the principle of evolution involved in "the survival of the fittest" that on the average the small family of high standard is the best fitted for present environment. If we must procreate let us do so when we want to, and as we want to, but above all let us do so intelligently.