

STERILIZATION FROM THE EUGENIC VIEWPOINT.

At a recent meeting of the Medico-Psychological Association of Great Britain and Ireland, the subject of elimination of what were called the unfit members of the community and the measures by which it was proposed to carry this out, were discussed. The occasion was the presentation of a paper on Sterilization from the Eugenic standpoint, by Dr. Geoffrey Clarke, whose paper was based upon a painstaking investigation and analysis of cases in the asylum at Epsom, England. The advocates of sterilization aver that present-day medical and hygienic care resulted in keeping alive a greater proportion of weaklings than formerly; but it must be remembered that there were many others whose early years were full of ailments and a source of anxiety to their parents, but who yet blossomed into vigorous and healthy adults. The great question which required answering was, Had the advances in science tended to impair the mental and physical qualities of the race? Dr. Clarke contended that the arguments and conclusions of stock-breeders could not be applied to human beings; the mental as well as the physical had to be reckoned with, and he did not think knowledge had yet advanced sufficiently far to enable anyone to say to certain people that they must not be permitted to reproduce their kind. Insanity was claimed to be not a definite disease, but a variation from the average normal standard, the standard itself varying with the country and time, and even in different places in the same country. For instance, a person might not be able to stand the stress and surroundings of a slum, but could live a successful life in a quiet country place. Moreover, there was a large class of mental degenerates who were yet not insane. If sterilization were to be adopted it should take place in some forms of mental disease quite apart from the eugenic standpoint. Dr. Clarke thought it had yet to be shown that any practicable scheme of sterilization would materially diminish the normal rate of increase of insanity. He did not think that any hope of a material decrease of insanity was justified on the statistics at present available

Discussion followed, the tenor of which was unfavorable to any interference with the laws of reproduction. Sterilization does not appear so necessary in the case of those who are definitely insane as for the feeble minded who are free to propagate their species. Then comes in the question of heredity and environment, of nature and nurture as Sir Francis Galton so happily expressed it. Human beings seem to vary enormously as regards heredity. In some there are produced little but the neurotic and insane, while others, who enter the world under the most unfavorable conditions, have been able to make good. The tendency in mental as well as physical disease is towards recovery under improved conditions. According to one neurologist, "nature steps in and does more than men's schemes are ever likely to do in an artificial way to check the production of the unfit. The largest number of cases of hereditary insanity occur at an early age, and therefore in those who do not procreate."

The question of sterilization of the so-called unfit was discussed at a meeting of the Detroit Society of Neurology and Psychiatry, in response to a request for the society's sanction of a legislative measure for the purpose. The society refused, however, to endorse the bill for various reasons, among which was lack of definiteness as to the field covered. Many favor sterilization, by the simple operation vasectomy or salpingectomy as the case may be, of the criminal, the habitual drunkard, the feeble minded. The matter, however, is one deserving the most careful consideration as well as the most exhaustive study.